

# The Celestial Ascent of the Soul

The Morphology of an Enduring Idea

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## Abstract

The wide spectrum of ideas found in contemporary Western spiritualities is often perceived by cultural historians and sociologists as ‘new’. Drawing on older esoteric traditions but reconstructed and reinterpreted according to modern scientific paradigms, such ideas, according to this view, comprise a unique and innovative response to the challenges of post-Enlightenment secularisation.<sup>1</sup> This scholarly perspective will be examined and questioned in this paper. Drawing on historical/literary sources, this paper will utilise a morphological approach to explore Western examples of the idea of the celestial ascent of the soul, from its earliest known recorded expressions in the Greco-Roman world to its presence in interiorised forms in twentieth and twenty-first century psychotherapies and contemporary spiritualities. These examples are examined in terms of both cultural variation and structural similarity. The immortality of the soul, its descent into a corporeal body, and its ascent to its heavenly home after death or in mystical states, comprise a central feature of the religious imagination in Western cultures from antiquity to the present. This paper challenges the hypothesis that the idea of the celestial ascent emerging in contemporary contexts is ‘new’, either structurally or in terms of its expression as an inner spiritual journey. The idea appears to demonstrate a kind of autonomy or ‘agency’: it maintains internal consistency at the same time that it interacts dynamically with other ideas in a wide variety of cultural contexts, generating creative permutations in the sphere of religious thought. This paper proposes that the capacity of the idea of the celestial ascent to retain structural integrity as well as creative adaptability over so many centuries may lie in its fusion of analogical and causal modes of perception, its capacity to be interpreted both objectively and subjectively, and its ability to embody, in visual and narrative forms, a fundamental response of the human religious imagination to the issues of life and death.

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<sup>1</sup>This approach is exemplified in the following works by Wouter J. Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); ‘New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian’s Perspective’, *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1999), pp. 145-160; ‘New Age Religion and Secularization’, *Numen*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2000), pp. 288-312; ‘How magic survived the disenchantment of the world’, *Religion*, Vol. 33 (2003), pp. 357-380.

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**Statement of Originality**

I declare that this dissertation represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and that it has not previously been included in a thesis, dissertation, or report submitted to Bath Spa University or to any other institution for a degree, diploma, or other qualification.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

For over a century, the idea of the celestial ascent of the soul has engaged religious and cultural historians seeking to understand why human beings, when faced with the vicissitudes of life and the inevitability of death, so often envisage salvation as a hierarchically structured journey to higher realms.<sup>1</sup> Historical routes of transmission of the idea can often be easily discerned. In the first century BCE, Cicero based his narrative of the heavenly journey in the *Somnium Scipionis* on the story of Er's ascent in Plato's *Republic*, written three centuries earlier;<sup>2</sup> and Ficino's fifteenth century description of the soul's descent into incarnation is unmistakably inspired by the early fifth century CE version offered by Macrobius, who included it in his commentary on Cicero.<sup>3</sup> However, focusing exclusively on the historical transmission of this religious narrative may obscure the importance of its extraordinary persistence as an idea, and its capacity for adaptation and amalgamation with other ideas within a wide variety of cultural paradigms. The soul's ascent may appear in cultural contexts where transmission is unlikely, which might imply transcultural 'universalism'.<sup>4</sup> But it is not necessary to assert an ontological spiritual truth or an ancient

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<sup>1</sup> On the antiquity and ubiquity of the idea, see Collins, John J., 'Introduction', in Collins, John J. and Michael Fishbane, eds., *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press) [hereafter *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys*], p. ix; Wright, J. Edward, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) [hereafter Wright, *Early History of Heaven*], pp. vii-ix; Couliano, Ioan P., *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (London: Shambhala, 1991) [hereafter Couliano, *Out of This World*], p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, X.614a-621d, trans. Paul Shorey [hereafter Plato, *Timaeus*], in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961) [hereafter *Dialogues*], pp. 838-844; Cicero, M. Tullius, *Somnium Scipionis*, in *De re publica and De legibus*, trans. C. W. Keyes (New York, NY: Loeb Classical Library, 1928), pp. 261-83. Also see the similarities between the celestial ascent in the second century CE *Poimandres*, CH I.24-26 [hereafter *Poimandres*], in *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction*, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) [hereafter *Hermetica*], p. 6, and the late fourth century CE descent in Servius, *Ad Aeneid*, VI.714, in Nock, A. D., 'The Lyra of Orpheus', *The Classical Review*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (Nov. 1927), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> Ficino, Marsilio, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, VI.4, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1985), p. 112; Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, XII.13, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990) [hereafter Macrobius], pp. 136-137. See also the discussion in Couliano, Ioan P., *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987) [hereafter Couliano, *Eros and Magic*], pp. 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of the unlikelihood of transmission, see the ascent narrative in Merkur, Dan, *Becoming Half Hidden: Shamanism and Initiation Among the Inuit* (PhD Thesis, Department of Comparative Religion, University of Stockholm,

and continuous esoteric tradition in order to recognise that some religious ideas seem to possess exceptional vitality and longevity across diverse cultures and epochs.

Scholars exploring the celestial ascent in early Western cultures sometimes describe its ‘progression’ from mythic image to mystical speculation or philosophical construct.<sup>5</sup> Or the idea is assumed to have vanished, along with other religious concepts from antiquity, in the wake of the ‘de-animation’ of the Hellenic cosmos between the late thirteenth century and the early modern period.<sup>6</sup> Such evolutionist approaches do not acknowledge that mythic, mystical, and philosophical versions of the ascent have existed side by side from antiquity to the present day. Historical examinations often overlook interiorised forms of the soul’s ascent emerging in later contexts such as the ‘occult revival’ of the late nineteenth century; these appear not to be recognised as expressions of the same idea, despite clear structural similarities. Alternatively, the appearance of an interiorised ascent narrative in contemporary spiritualities is often seen as a peculiarly modern and individualistic response to the challenges of secularised Western culture.<sup>7</sup> But expressions of the celestial ascent as an inner spiritual journey are far older than the post-Enlightenment phenomenon of secularisation,

1985, distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm), pp. 207-224. For a universalist approach to the celestial ascent, see Eliade, Mircea, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 487-494; Eliade, Mircea, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1974), pp. 102-109.

<sup>5</sup> On the ‘myth to mysticism’ approach to the celestial ascent, see Jonas, Hans, ‘Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought’, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct. 1969) [hereafter Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism’], pp. 315-329. On the ‘myth to philosophy’ approach, see Turner, John D., ‘The Gnostic Threefold Path to Enlightenment: The Ascent of the Mind and the Descent of Wisdom’, *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct. 1980) [hereafter Turner, ‘Gnostic Threefold Path’], pp. 324-351.

<sup>6</sup> On the ‘de-animation’ and ‘discarding’ of Hellenic cosmology, see Lewis, C. S., *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 [1964]); Grierson, Philip, ‘The European Heritage’, in Carmen Blacker and Michael Loewe, eds., *Ancient Cosmologies* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974) [hereafter *Ancient Cosmologies*], pp. 225-258; Dales, Richard C., ‘The De-Animation of the Heavens in the Middle Ages’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1980), pp. 531-550; Duhem, Pierre, *Medieval Cosmology: Theories of Infinity, Place, Time, Void, and the Plurality of Worlds*, ed. and trans. Roger Ariew (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985 [1913-17]), pp. 3-17.

<sup>7</sup> For this view of contemporary spiritualities, see Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ‘New Age Religion and Secularization’, *Numen*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2000), pp. 288-312; Hanegraaff, Wouter J., *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) [hereafter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*]; Hervieu-Léger, Danièle, ‘Secularization, Tradition and New Forms of Religiosity: Some Theoretical Proposals’, in Eileen Barker and Margit Warburg, eds., *New Religions and New Religiosity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), pp. 28-44; Lambert, Yves, ‘Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?’, trans. A. T. Larson and S. Londquist, in William H. Swatos, Jr. and Daniel V. A. Olson, eds., *The Secularization Debate* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) [hereafter Swatos and Olson, *Secularization Debate*], pp. 95-125.

unless, as Stark and Bainbridge suggest, secularisation is understood as an integral process of self-equilibrium that forms a healthy aspect of the cycles of religious growth and change throughout history.<sup>8</sup>

Using historical/literary sources, this paper will focus on specific examples of the celestial ascent in Western cultures, from its expressions in the Greco-Roman world to its early modern contexts, its importance in the late nineteenth century ‘occult revival’, and its presence in interiorised forms in twentieth and twenty-first century psychotherapies and contemporary spiritualities. These examples are explored from a morphological perspective, taking into account both structural similarity and cultural variation. This paper will argue that the idea of the celestial ascent of the soul cannot be understood purely as a cultural construct. Although its routes of transmission can often be traced, the ‘origin’ of the idea may always elude attempts to locate it, perhaps because, as Latour suggests, such ideas descend ‘miraculously from the Heaven of Ideas’.<sup>9</sup> The idea of the celestial ascent appears to demonstrate a kind of autonomous vitality or ‘agency’.<sup>10</sup> This paper will suggest that the structure of the idea retains consistency at the same time that it interacts with other ideas in a wide variety of cultural contexts, producing constantly shifting permutations in the sphere of religious thought. The celestial ascent can express itself in both objective and subjective

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<sup>8</sup> Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985). On this approach to secularisation, see also Sharot, Stephen, ‘Magic, Religion, Science, and Secularization’ [hereafter Sharot], in Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, and Paul Virgil McCracken Flesher, *Religion, Science, and Magic: In Concert and in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) [hereafter *Religion, Science, and Magic*], pp. 272-273; Swatos, William H., Jr. and Kevin J. Christiano, ‘Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept’, in Swatos and Olson, *Secularization Debate*, pp. 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> Latour, Bruno, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) [hereafter Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*], p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> For a structuralist perspective on the ‘agency’ of ideas, see Couliano, Ioan P., *The Tree of Gnosis* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992) [hereafter Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*], pp. 2-7. For a cognitive perspective, see Lawson, E. Thomas, ‘Psychological perspectives on agency’, in Andresen, Jensine, ed., *Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) [hereafter Andresen, *Religion in Mind*], pp. 141-172; Lawson, E. Thomas, ‘Cognition’, in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2006 [2000]), pp. 75-84; Pyysiäinen, Ilkka, ‘Cognition, emotion, and religious experience’, in Andresen, *Religion in Mind*, pp. 70-89. On ideas as ‘configurations of experience’, see Jung, C. G., *Psychological Types*, CW6, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), paras. 512-533; Jung, C. G., *The Symbolic Life*, CW18, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) [hereafter Jung, CW18], para. 742; Jung, C. G., *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, CW8, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977 [1960]) [hereafter Jung, CW8], paras. 352-353.

forms within the same cultural setting, depending not only on prevailing social currents, but also on the individuals who give expression to the idea. The continuity of this idea over many centuries may depend partly on its capacity to combine analogical and causal modes of perception, and its ability to embody, in visual and narrative forms, characteristic patterns of the human religious imagination.

Approaching the idea of the celestial ascent from a morphological perspective does not diminish the importance of cultural differentiation.<sup>11</sup> There are many ideas with longevity and adaptability, but at present there seems to be a dearth of literature exploring the complex interface between the specific cultural forms of an idea and its spontaneous emergence as an expression of typical human patterns of perception. Current trends in the history of religions, after nearly a century of the ‘intellectual tyranny of meta-narratives’,<sup>12</sup> understandably emphasise cultural differences and minimise generalisations. This paper is an attempt to examine the question from a different perspective, and therefore necessarily excludes a detailed investigation of every possible example of the celestial ascent. However, it is hoped that the vigour and enduring life of this important religious idea will be emphasised, helping to balance a current tendency to interpret themes emerging in contemporary Western spiritualities as entirely localised and determined by social factors. It is possible to honour simultaneously both the richness of cultural differences and the consistency of the human religious imagination, which tends to generate characteristic narratives of salvation in the face of the great mysteries of life and death.

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<sup>11</sup> On morphology as a methodology, see Smith, Jonathan Z., *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990) [hereafter Smith, *Drudgery Divine*], pp. 52-53; Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, pp. 4-7; Collins, John J., ‘Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre’, in John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979) [hereafter Collins, *Apocalypse*, pp. 1-19.

<sup>12</sup> On meta-narratives, see Davies, Charlotte Aull, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 4-5.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### 2.1: Review of previous work

The historiography of the celestial ascent of the soul sometimes reveals more about ‘researcher’s bias’ than about the idea itself.<sup>13</sup> One of the first influential modern studies specifically exploring the soul’s heavenly journey is Anz’s *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Versuch*, published in 1897, followed by Bousset’s *Die Himmelsreise der Seele*, published in 1901.<sup>14</sup> These works, emerging from the German academic current of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries known as the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, reflect a particular *agendum* dedicated to locating the origin of Greek, Jewish, and Christian accounts of the celestial ascent in early Iranian religion.<sup>15</sup> Three further approaches to the Western emergence of the idea were formulated in the following decades, all in pursuit of a single prototype. The first postulates an origin in Scythian shamanism; the second, in an uninterrupted Pythagorean tradition; the third, developed by Franz Cumont, in early Iranian religion mediated by Hellenistic astrology.<sup>16</sup> These ‘origin hypotheses’ no longer exercise the fascination they once did, as Van den Broek suggests: ‘The persistence of a religious phenomenon in varying cultural and religious

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<sup>13</sup> On ‘researcher’s bias’, see Bryman, Alan, *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2006 [1988]), p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Anz, Wilhelm, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnostizismus: Ein religionsgeschichtlicher Versuch* (Leipzig: Druck von A. Preis, 1897); Bousset, Wilhelm, ‘*Die Himmelsreise der Seele*’ (Stuttgart: *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, Vol. 4, 1901).

<sup>15</sup> On the ideological bias of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, see Couliano, Ioan P., *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance* (Leiden: Brill, 1983) [hereafter Couliano, *Psychanodia*], pp. 16-23; Moreschini, Chiara O. Tommasi, ‘Review of Hans Dieter Betz, *The “Mithras Liturgy”*’, *Plekos*, Vol. 6 (2004), pp. 129-136; Collins, Adela Yarbro, ‘The Seven Heavens in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses’ [hereafter A. Collins, ‘Seven Heavens’], in *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys*, p. 59. For a recent attempt to locate the origins of both Greek and Jewish ascents in ancient Assyrian religion, see Parpola, Simo, ‘The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Jul. 1993), pp. 161-208.

<sup>16</sup> On the shamanistic theory, see Rohde, Erwin, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006 [1925]); Dodds, E. R., *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951) [hereafter Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*]. On the Pythagorean theory, see Méautis, Georges, *Recherches sur le Pythagorisme* (Paris: Neuchâtel, 1922); Rougier, Louis, *L’origine astronomique de la croyance pythagoricienne en l’immortalité céleste des âmes* (Paris: Le Caire, 1933). On Cumont’s theory, see Cumont, Franz, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002 [1922]); Cumont, Franz, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1960 [1912]).

contexts is not explained if one is able to locate exactly the place of its cradle'.<sup>17</sup>

The vast bibliography of more recent academic literature on the subject, freed from the ideological predilections of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* but sometimes fettered by other scholarly *agenda*, has focused primarily on the local sources, variations, and dissemination of the idea in antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Research in the last two decades has examined the celestial ascent within the context of a specific religious current, such as Mithraism, Gnosticism, or the Greek magical papyri, and several recent works are dedicated to the theme in early Jewish mystical literature.<sup>19</sup> This culture-specific approach is favoured by some scholars because it avoids the dangers of the single universal model.<sup>20</sup> The celestial ascent has also been examined from functionalist, psychoanalytic, and cognitivist perspectives.<sup>21</sup> These interpretations, often highly reductionist, may be as insistently doctrinal as religionist assertions of the reality of the soul. Less reductive approaches, such as those of analytical, archetypal, and transpersonal psychologies, have not been utilised in exploring the idea of the ascent in any comprehensive way, although it is discussed within an archetypal framework in relation to early Islamic mysticism and spiritual alchemy,<sup>22</sup> and is repeatedly mentioned in

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<sup>17</sup> Van den Broek, Roelof, 'The Present State of Gnostic Studies', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Mar. 1983) [hereafter Van den Broek, 'Gnostic Studies'], p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Segal, Alan F., 'Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity, and Their Environment', *ANRW II*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1980) [hereafter Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent'], pp. 1333-1394; Boustani, Ra'anan and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) [hereafter *Heavenly Realms*]; Wright, *Early History of Heaven*.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Beck, Roger, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) [hereafter Beck, *Mithras Cult*]; Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*; Betz, Hans Dieter, *The "Mithras Liturgy": Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) [hereafter Betz, 'Mithras Liturgy']. On early Jewish literature, see, for example, Himmelfarb, Martha, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) [hereafter Himmelfarb]; Idel, Moshe, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2005) [hereafter Idel, *Ascensions*].

<sup>20</sup> See the methodological discussion in Zaleski, Carol, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experiences in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) [hereafter Zaleski], p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> For a psychoanalytic approach to the celestial ascent, see Halperin, David J., *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988). For a functionalist approach, see Segal, Alan F., *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004) [hereafter Segal, *Life After Death*]. For a cognitive approach, see Couliano, *Out of This World*. For a cognitive approach to mystical states in general, see Andresen, *Religion in Mind*.

<sup>22</sup> On the ascent in Islamic mysticism, see Corbin, Henry, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1980) [hereafter Corbin, *Avicenna*]. On the ascent in spiritual alchemy, see Raff, Jeffrey, *Jung and the Alchemical Imagination* (York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 2000) [hereafter Raff].

various volumes of Jung's *Collected Works*.<sup>23</sup> It seems that no in-depth exploration has been made of the celestial ascent in modern contexts such as Theosophy and late nineteenth century occultism, although related ideas within contemporary spiritualities have been examined from historical and sociological perspectives.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2: Similar but different

Not every celestial ascent involves the idea of the soul. The Babylonian Etana is transported to heaven on the back of an eagle, but falls off because he is so heavy.<sup>25</sup> The biblical Enoch is 'taken up' bodily by God, and the beautiful Greek youth Ganymede is physically abducted to heaven by Zeus.<sup>26</sup> Equally, not all beliefs about the soul involve an ascent. Zaleski notes that, in its most familiar form, the soul's journey is a descent into the underworld.<sup>27</sup> When soul and ascent do coincide, there is no single 'authoritative' version of the narrative. Even the term 'soul' carries different connotations according to collective and individual interpretations.<sup>28</sup> The celestial ascent of the soul is also of greater importance in some historical epochs than in others. Ascent motifs, according to Segal, form the structural pattern for nearly all the Hellenistic religions of late antiquity. Segal's interpretation is functionalist: the soul's heavenly journey provides a cosmic endorsement of the authority of prophets, priests, and

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Jung, C. G., *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, CW14 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 [1963]) [hereafter Jung, CW14], paras. 297-299.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 221-223, 474-475; Hughes, Dureen J., 'Blending With an Other: An Analysis of Trance Channeling in the United States', *Ethos*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Jun. 1991) [hereafter Hughes, 'Trance Channeling'], pp. 161-184; Albanese, Catherine L., 'The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Explorations in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Jun. 1999) [hereafter Albanese, 'Subtle Energies'], pp. 305-325.

<sup>25</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, p. 76; Couliano, *Out of This World*, p. 56; Hooke, S. H., *Middle Eastern Mythology: From the Assyrians to the Hebrews* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1963]), pp. 59-60.

<sup>26</sup> On Enoch, see Genesis, 5:24. On Enoch's *somanodia* or bodily ascent, see Tabor, James D., "'Returning to the Divinity": Josephus' Portrayal of the Disappearance of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 108, No. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 225-238. On Ganymede, see Ganz, Timothy, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 557.

<sup>27</sup> Zaleski, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, discussions of the soul in Platonism and Gnosticism by Turner, 'Gnostic Threefold Path', pp. 324-351; Van den Broek, Roelof, 'The Authentikos Logos: A New Document of Christian Platonism', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (September 1979), pp. 260-286.

rulers.<sup>29</sup> While this may often be the case, any narrative of the soul's ascent is shaped by individual experience and predisposition as well as by cultural context, and the same is true of any scholarly interpretation of that narrative. Individual societies, whatever their degree of cohesion, do not produce identical individuals, and every account of the celestial ascent, as well as every scholarly interpretation of that account, is created by an individual. Specific modes of perception, in individuals as well as in cultures, are as relevant to the manner in which a religious idea is articulated as are socio-political factors. Scholem suggests that early Jewish ascent narratives reflect the mystical experiences of their anonymous authors, while Himmelfarb understands these accounts as a conventional literary form with a religious and political *agendum*.<sup>30</sup> This debate reveals as much about differences between individual researchers, and the modes of perception exhibited in research paradigms during the last three decades, as it does about cultural consistency in late antiquity.

Reflexivity may help to avoid imposing modern categories of thought on cultures that do not draw clear distinctions between veridical/literal and symbolic, or use poetic rather than didactic language, or encourage individualistic expressions of religious ideas.<sup>31</sup> The ascent of the soul belongs to the complex sphere of human religious experience, and scholarship on religion, as Idel notes, is 'rarely an innocent and detached enterprise'.<sup>32</sup> Zaleski observes that modern language has no mode of expression combining analytic and symbolic thought. Our conceptualisations are too abstract, but our images and symbols are too concrete; we sense

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<sup>29</sup> Segal, 'Heavenly Ascent', p. 1392.

<sup>30</sup> Scholem, Gershom, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1961) [hereafter Scholem, *Major Trends*], pp. 50-51; Himmelfarb, pp. 95-114.

<sup>31</sup> On reflexivity in the study of religions, see Hufford, David J., 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', in McCutcheon, Russell T., ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1999) [hereafter *Insider/Outsider Problem*], pp. 294-310.

<sup>32</sup> Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 3. On the difficulties of modern interpretations of mystical literature, see Moore, Peter, 'Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique' [hereafter Moore, 'Mystical Experience'], in Katz, Steven T., ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978) [hereafter *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*], pp. 101-131.

that both modes of understanding are necessary, but they seem mutually exclusive.<sup>33</sup> Hanegraaff's comprehensive analysis of the 'psychologization of the sacred and the sacralization of psychology' in contemporary spiritualities is unquestionably useful in understanding those belief-systems where psychological and religious terminologies are used interchangeably.<sup>34</sup> But awareness of the psychological dimension of religious experience is not exclusive to the period following the invention of the word 'psychology', and it may be inappropriate to assume that only secularised 'moderns' experience that state which Heelas, referring to 'New Age' beliefs, calls 'self-spirituality'.<sup>35</sup> Tambiah notes that both mystical and rational thought can be 'normative ideational systems' within the same culture and the same individual,<sup>36</sup> and it is not always clear whether any specific account of the soul's ascent, ancient or modern, is understood by its narrator as 'objective' on a physical level, 'subjective' on a spiritual level, 'symbolic' on a psychological level, 'allegorical' on a philosophical level, 'real' but occurring in an otherworld or *mundus imaginalis*, or a mixture of any or all of these.<sup>37</sup>

The celestial ascent is found in cosmologies with diverse heavenly landscapes.<sup>38</sup> During the Hellenistic period, for example, there are usually seven heavens, often explicitly

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<sup>33</sup> Zaleski, p. 191.

<sup>34</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 224-229. For examples of this mingling of terminologies, see Maslow, Abraham H., *Toward a Psychology of Being* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1999 [1968]); Grof, Stanislav, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Heelas, Paul, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 19. On the assertion of individual spiritual authority in antiquity, see Jonas, Hans, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1963 [1958]) [hereafter Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*], pp. 32-33.

<sup>36</sup> Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja, *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) [hereafter Tambiah], p. 92. On the 'two poles' of mythic and rational thought, see also Faivre, Antoine and Karen-Claire Voss, 'Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion', *Numen*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jan. 1995), p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> On the *mundus imaginalis*, see Corbin, Henry, 'Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal', trans. Ruth Horine [hereafter Corbin, 'Mundus Imaginalis'], in Benjamin Sells, ed., *Working with Images: The Theoretical Base of Archetypal Psychology* (Woodstock, CT: Spring Publications, 2000), pp. 70-89; Berger, Adriana, 'Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (April 1986), pp. 141-156.

<sup>38</sup> On typical cosmologies in antiquity, see Edmonds, Radcliffe G. III, 'The Faces of the Moon: Cosmology, Genesis, and the *Mithras Liturgy*' [hereafter Edmonds], in *Heavenly Realms*, pp. 277-278; Schäfer, Peter, 'In Heaven as It Is in Hell: The Cosmology of *Seder Rabbah di-Bereshit*' [hereafter Schäfer, 'In Heaven'], in *Heavenly Realms*, pp. 259-261; Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, pp. 199-200; Himmelfarb, pp. 32-33.

related to the planetary spheres, but there may also be eight or nine, or even a vast proliferation of celestial realms.<sup>39</sup> Edmonds comments that the perceived ‘purpose’ of the soul’s ascent influences both the moral implications of its stages and the character and intentions of the heavenly beings met *en route*.<sup>40</sup> This culture-specific expression of the idea depends on how the soul’s descent into the world of matter is evaluated. If mortal life is a punishment for sin, or the cosmos itself is evil, the ascent will involve great dangers and trials. If mortal life is good and necessary for the ‘perfection of the All’,<sup>41</sup> the ascent will be more joyful. Katz notes that mystical experiences, which form the basis of many, if not most, ascent narratives, are ‘intended’ to achieve a final state according to the fundamental questions at the heart of the religious tradition in which they are embedded (such as concern with sin, the problem of suffering, or the enrichment of spiritual life).<sup>42</sup> The experience itself thus involves different mental constructs, ontological assumptions, and metaphysical structures which order perceptions in different ways. The celestial ascent functions as an important component of religious systems involving a wide range of speculations on why the soul has incarnated in the first place. However, it is still an ascent and not a descent; it is still formulated as a series of ‘different stages of experience’;<sup>43</sup> and the dualism of body and soul remains consistent regardless of the heavenly geography.

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<sup>39</sup> For seven heavens, see Schäfer, ‘In Heaven’, pp. 233-274. For the seven planetary spheres, see Macrobius, 1.12. For eight spheres, see *Poimandres*, CH I.24-26, in *Hermetica*, p. 6. For nine heavens, see *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, trans. Peter A. Dirkse and Douglas M. Parrott, NHC VI.6, in Robinson, James M., ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: Brill, 1977) [hereafter *Nag Hammadi Library*], pp. 292-297; also see Mahé, Jean-Pierre, ‘A Reading of the *Discourse on the Ogdoad and the Ennead* (Nag Hammadi Codex VI.6)’ [hereafter Mahé], in Van den Broek, Roelof and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) [hereafter *Gnosis and Hermeticism*], pp. 79-85. For sixty heavens, see Stobaeus, Johannes, *Stobaei Hermetica*, SH XXV-XXVI, trans. G. R. S. Mead, in Mead, G. R. S., *Thrice Greatest Hermes: Studies in Hellenistic Theosophy and Gnosis*, Vol. 3 (Detroit, MI: Hermes Press, 1978 [1907]), pp. 93-187; see also the discussion of SH XXVI in Shumaker, Wayne, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972) [hereafter Shumaker, *Occult Sciences*], pp. 226-27. For a proliferation of heavenly realms, see *Zostrianos*, NHC VIII.1, trans. John H. Sieber, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 368-393.

<sup>40</sup> Edmonds, p. 276.

<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 41b, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Dialogues*, p. 1170.

<sup>42</sup> Katz, Steven T., ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’ [hereafter Katz, ‘Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism’], in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Moore, ‘Mystical Experience’, p. 104.

### 2.3: Idea complexes, narratives, ideal objects, and archetypes

A number of terms have been formulated to explore the continuity of religious ideas such as the celestial ascent. Quispel suggests the phrase, ‘basic structure of religious apperception’, while Riffard proposes ‘anthropological structure’, implying a human predisposition to generate religious ideas according to specific patterns of thought.<sup>44</sup> Hanegraaff prefers ‘idea complex’: a cluster of related ideas recognisable over time because of family resemblance.<sup>45</sup> The celestial ascent might be understood as an ‘idea complex’ because it amalgamates the related ideas of the dualism of body and soul, the divine origin of the latter, and a series of progressive stages of purification, enlightenment, and union with the divine; these are reinterpreted and reconstructed in various forms within different cultural frameworks, but remain recognisable through structural consistency. Latour speaks of an ‘anthropological matrix’ beneath the specialised structures of modern thought, from which ‘narratives’ arise that ‘mobilize heaven and earth...bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs’ in a manner that contradicts our apparent modernity.<sup>46</sup>

Couliano offers the term ‘ideal object’ to define systems of thought which operate like fractals: comprised of a simple structural formula, they tend to produce solutions *ad infinitum* according to logical production rules.<sup>47</sup> ‘Ideal objects’ involve complex relationships between humans, nonhumans (such as planetary gods, the World Soul, God), and objects (such as planets, metals, talismanic images and substances). Such systems interact with each other and with cultural contexts in transformative ways. Although Couliano dismisses Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious as having no cognitive basis, nevertheless the ‘ideal object’

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<sup>44</sup> Quispel, Gilles, *Gnosis als Weltreligion: Die Bedeutung der Gnosis in der Antike* (Zürich, 1972), p. 39; Riffard, Pierre, *L’esoterisme* (Paris, 1990), p. 135; both in Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ‘On the Construction of Esoteric Traditions’ [hereafter Hanegraaff, ‘Esoteric Traditions’], in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) [hereafter *Western Esotericism*], pp. 20-22.

<sup>45</sup> Hanegraaff, ‘Esoteric Traditions’, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 107.

<sup>47</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, p. 28.

resembles Jung's concept of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, on which Quispel's term, 'basic structure of religious apperception', is based.<sup>48</sup> The word 'archetype' appears in ancient sources such as Philo, Irenaeus, Augustine, and the Hermetic literature, and Jung relates it to the Platonic *eidos*: forms or patterns that have existed 'since the remotest times'.<sup>49</sup> Archetypes are expressions of the inner dynamics of the human psyche, which become accessible to human consciousness through projection – 'that is, mirrored in the events of nature'.<sup>50</sup> Jung is evasive about whether these patterns might also be present in nature, although he implies that an invisible structural relationship exists between humans and nature that encourages a perception of 'correspondences' or 'sympathies'. The archetypal image is culturally mediated. The archetype itself, as a structure or pattern, has no image until humans provide one: 'The term 'archetype' is often misunderstood as meaning a certain definite mythological image...The archetype is, on the contrary, an inherited *tendency* of the human mind to form representations...that vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern'.<sup>51</sup>

These terms – 'structure of religious apperception', 'anthropological matrix', 'idea complex', 'narrative', 'ideal object', 'archetype' – are neither identical nor interchangeable, and all have been formulated in relation to specific fields of research. However, all of them permit the possibility that ideas can display a kind of autonomy. Rather than being generated by cultural currents, ideas, interacting with other ideas as well as with individuals, collectives, and external events, may themselves help to generate those cultural currents. This does not suggest the attribution of human will and intelligence to abstract concepts, but it implies a quality of agency or dynamism that infuses a powerful idea with both continuing appeal and continuing adaptability. This perspective can be useful in exploring the celestial

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<sup>48</sup> Couliano, *Out of This World*, p. 9. For Quispel's Jungian orientation, see Hanegraaff, 'Esoteric Traditions', p. 21.

<sup>49</sup> Jung, C. G., *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, CW9 Part I* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975 [1959]) [hereafter Jung, *CW9i*], para. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Jung, *CW9i*, para. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Jung, C. G., *CW18*, para. 523.

ascent as a potent and enduring idea that reveals itself through, and may even transform, the specific cultures and individuals who provide it with imagery and function.

Tabor divides the celestial ascent into four types: ascent as an invasion of heaven, ascent to receive revelation, ascent to immortal heavenly life, and ascent as a foretaste of the heavenly world.<sup>52</sup> Any consistent structure in the idea of the ascent will be applicable to all these except the first, which involves the physical journey or abduction by the gods of a mortal whose origin is not understood as heavenly. These ‘invasions’ tend to appear in religious frameworks that do not acknowledge the independent existence of an immortal soul.<sup>53</sup> Equally, any consistent structure in the idea of the celestial ascent will be discernible whether the ascent is understood veridically, as an objective journey; mythically, as a poetic image of cosmic processes; allegorically, to convey a specific doctrine of moral development; symbolically, as a process of psychological or spiritual unfoldment; hermeneutically, as an interpretive framework imposed on texts or images; or a mixture of any or all of these. Paul, describing his own ascent in 2 Cor. 12:1-12, expresses the same perplexity often evinced by scholars: ‘Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows’.

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<sup>52</sup> Tabor, James D., ‘Ascent to Heaven in Antiquity’ (University of North Carolina, 2001), at <<http://www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/jdtabor/heavenlyascent.html>>.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the exceptional ascent in the Babylonian *Maqlû* (burning) ritual in Abusch, Tzvi, ‘Ascent to the Stars in a Mesopotamian Ritual: Social Metaphor and Religious Experience’, in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, pp. 15-39; Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, pp. 26-51; Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 101-103.

### Chapter 3: The celestial ascent in antiquity

#### 3.1: The ‘Platonic space shuttle’<sup>54</sup>

The celestial ascent of the soul appears in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts of the third and second millennia BCE.<sup>55</sup> An image from the tomb of King Unas, depicting the king ascending to heaven *via* the steps of a pyramid, suggests that pyramidal architecture itself is meant to reflect the idea of the ascent.<sup>56</sup> However, celestial ascent in Egypt was available only to royalty.<sup>57</sup> A more democratic access to heaven first emerges in Greece in the 6th century BCE or earlier, in a fluid aggregate of soteriological doctrines, rituals, and sacred texts linked by the common theme of the soul’s ascent, and known as the Orphic mysteries.<sup>58</sup> Extant Orphic texts incorporate elements also found in Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician, Iranian, and Indian religious systems, as well as Thracian and Scythian shamanistic practices.<sup>59</sup> The core doctrine of Orphism is the possibility of attaining celestial immortality, expressed as ‘mystical yearnings after a union between man and god’.<sup>60</sup> The Orphic theogonies explain why the soul has descended into embodiment: humans must expiate the primal sin of the

<sup>54</sup> This phrase is taken from Couliano, *Out of This World*, p. 188.

<sup>55</sup> On the celestial ascent in the Pyramid Texts, see Davis, Whitney M., ‘The Ascension-Myth in the Pyramid Texts’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (July 1977) [hereafter Davis], pp. 161-179; Faulkner, R. O., ‘The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, No. 25, Vol. 3 (July 1966), pp. 153-161; Wente, Edward F., ‘Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (July 1982), pp. 161-179; Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, pp. 3-25; Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 38-54.

<sup>56</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, p. 37.

<sup>57</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, p. 55.

<sup>58</sup> Johnston, Sarah Iles, ‘Working Aftertime in the Afterlife; or, No Rest for the Virtuous’, in *Heavenly Realms*, p. 90; Burkert, Walter, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) [hereafter Burkert, *Greek Religion*], p. 296; Guthrie, W. K. C., *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952) [hereafter Guthrie, *Orpheus*], pp. 6-24.

<sup>59</sup> For the Orphic theogonies see West, M. L., *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) [hereafter West, *Orphic Poems*], pp. 68-258; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 69-130. On possible Egyptian influences, see Burkert, Walter, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 71-98. On possible Phoenician influences, see West, M. L., ‘*Ab ovo*: Orpheus, Sanchuniathon and the Origins of the Ionian World Model’, *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1994), pp. 289-307. On possible Babylonian influences see Kirk, G. S., J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957) [hereafter Kirk *et al.*], p. 22, n. 1; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 101-102; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, p. 98. On possible Iranian influences see Kirk *et al.*, p. 22, n. 1; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 103-105; Eisler, Robert, *Orpheus the Fisher: Comparative Studies in Orphic and Early Christian Cult Symbolism* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2001 [1925]), pp. 24-29, 42-50. On Indian and shamanistic influences see West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 4-7, 104. On the problems of Orphic scholarship, see Kingsley, Peter, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) [hereafter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy*], pp. 117-118; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 296.

<sup>60</sup> Guthrie, *Orpheus*, p. 6. See also Harrison, Jane, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: Merlin Press, 1980 [1903]), p. 477.

Titans, from whose ashes the human body was first formed. Purification is necessary through successive incarnations, and earthly life is a kind of expiatory prison from which only the initiate can hope for ultimate freedom. A good deal of evidence about Orphic beliefs is available from Plato, who seems to have been profoundly influenced by it:

Some say the body is the grave of the soul. Probably the Orphic poets were the inventors of the name, and they were under the impression that the soul is suffering the punishment of sin, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is incarcerated, kept safe...until the penalty is paid.<sup>61</sup>

Burkert suggests that Orphism presents a radical shift toward dualism in this concept of the soul: in every human being there is an immortal individual essence, related to the essence of deity, that preserves its identity independent of the mortal and transient body.<sup>62</sup>

Achieving freedom from successive rebirths is described on the fifth to fourth century BCE Orphic gold plates or *lamellae* found in tombs throughout the Greek world.<sup>63</sup> These small, thin gold leaves, inscribed with ritual formulae and buried with the deceased, may be magical in nature; their wording is designed to persuade the underworld rulers to allow the soul to leave earth forever and ascend to its celestial home.<sup>64</sup> A fifth century BCE gold *lamella* from Hipponion in southern Italy presents a claim similar to those of other *lamellae*: the deceased declares, ‘I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven, but my race is of Heaven alone’.<sup>65</sup> On inscribed bone plaques dated to the 6th century BCE, found in Greek tombs in the Ukraine and marked with the word ‘*Orphikoi*’, the deceased announces to the underworld

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<sup>61</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 399c, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Dialogues*, p. 437.

<sup>62</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 300. On Orphic doctrines of the soul’s immortality, see also Burkert, Walter, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) [hereafter Burkert, *Ancient Pythagoreanism*], pp. 125-136.

<sup>63</sup> For details of the *lamellae*, see Cole, Susan G., ‘Landscapes of Dionysus and Elysian Fields’, in Cosmopoulos, Michael B., ed., *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (London: Routledge, 2003) [hereafter Cole], pp. 193-217; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 171ff; West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>64</sup> Kotansky, Roy, ‘Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets’, in Faraone, Christopher A. and Dirk Obbink, eds., *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) [hereafter *Magika Hiera*], pp. 114-116.

<sup>65</sup> Cole, p. 200.

deities: ‘I belong to the heavenly lineage.’<sup>66</sup>

In the context of the funerary *lamellae*, the Orphic celestial ascent is clearly post-mortem. But the Orphics also seem to have practised ritual initiations, probably involving music, chanting, incense, and sacred objects.<sup>67</sup> From the evidence of the eighty-seven extant ‘Orphic’ hymns composed in late antiquity, and magical papyri such as the so-called ‘Mithras Liturgy’, in which music, prayer, sacred objects, and *voces magicae* (glossolalia) are theurgic means to induce a celestial ascent, it is possible that Orphic rituals were intended to facilitate the ascent of the living neophyte as a preparation for the promised bliss of the afterlife.<sup>68</sup> The idea that the ascent can occur during life as an interior, transformative experience may thus be very ancient, and it is here that scholarly difficulties begin concerning the interpretation of ascent narratives. When the celestial ascent is clearly presented as a veridical journey to the stars, like the catasterism of Julius Caesar, it is easy to attribute the idea either to a pre-modern mentality or, in more recent interpretations, to a political *agendum*.<sup>69</sup> A distinction

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<sup>66</sup> Cole, p. 208.

<sup>67</sup> On Orphic initiation rituals, see West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 155-163 and 167-170; Betegh, Gábor, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 69-70 and 88-89; Delbrueck, R. and W. Vollgraff, ‘An Orphic Bowl’, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 54, Part 2 (1934), pp. 129-139; Burkert, Walter, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influences on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, trans. Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 124-127. On wandering Orphic priests or *Orpheotelestai* who perform initiation ceremonies, see Plato, *Republic*, II.364b-365a, in *Dialogues*, pp. 610-612; Burkert, *Ancient Pythagoreanism*, p. 125.

<sup>68</sup> On the Orphic hymns, see West, *Orphic Poems*, pp. 28-29, 252-253; Guthrie, *Orpheus*, pp. 257-261. For a translation of the hymns, see ‘The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus’, trans. Thomas Taylor, in Taylor, Thomas, *Hymns and Initiations* (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1994 [1824]), pp. 23-159. On the use of music and *voces magicae* in the ‘Mithras liturgy’, see Betz, pp. 103-106; Janowitz, Naomi, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001) [hereafter Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*], pp. 80-81. On *voces magicae* in the Hermetic ascent, see Quispel, ‘Reincarnation and Magic in the Asclepius’, in Roelof Van den Broek and Cis van Heertum, eds., *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikaan, 2000) [hereafter *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*], pp. 167-231. On *voces magicae* in early Jewish and Greco-Egyptian mystical ascents, see Lesses, Rebecca, ‘Speaking with Angels: Jewish and Greco-Egyptian Revelatory Adjurations’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (Jan. 1996) [hereafter Lesses], pp. 41-60; Bohak, Gideon, ‘Hebrew, Hebrew Everywhere? Notes on the Interpretation of *Voces Magicae*’, in Noegel, Scott, Joel Walker, and Brannon Wheeler, eds., *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 69-82. On *voces magicae* in Neoplatonic ascents and in the *Chaldean Oracles*, see Johnston, Sarah Iles, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate’s Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990) [hereafter Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*], pp. 88-9, 111; Luck, Georg, ‘Theurgy and Forms of Worship in Neoplatonism’ [hereafter Luck, ‘Theurgy and Forms of Worship’], in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, pp. 185-225; Shaw, Gregory, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Dodds, E. R., ‘Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism’, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 37, Parts 1 and 2 (1947) [hereafter Dodds, ‘Theurgy’], pp. 55-69.

<sup>69</sup> On Caesar’s stellar apotheosis, see Suetonius, *Caesar*, 88; Cassius Dio, 45.7.1; Plutarch, *Caesar*, 69.3; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 2.23.93-94, all in Cramer, Frederick H., *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Chicago, IL: Aries Publishers, 1996 [1954]),

can immediately be made between such ‘objective’ portrayals and the inner spiritual journey of the ‘New Age’ aspirant. When an ancient ascent narrative involves the soul of a living human being, imposing modern concepts of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ becomes problematic. Because of the paucity of extant literary sources, it remains an open question how the Orphics understood the ascent experiences of their initiates.

Plato provides the idea of the soul’s ascent with a conceptual framework, thereby embedding it firmly in the religious and philosophical currents, not only of antiquity, but also of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, early modern movements such as spiritual alchemy and Rosicrucianism, and contemporary spiritualities.<sup>70</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, Plato declares, ‘All soul is immortal’, and gives his account of the soul’s great pilgrimage on earth and through the heavens.<sup>71</sup> In the *Republic*, he provides a mythic portrayal of the heavenly realms through which the soul journeys into and out of incarnation.<sup>72</sup> In the *Timaeus*, he informs us that the human soul is a plant ‘not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth’, which will one day return from earth ‘to our kindred who are in heaven.’<sup>73</sup> In the *Symposium*, he describes a *nousanodia*, a spiritual ascent to an inner experience of immortality, known as the ‘ladder of Diotima’.<sup>74</sup> The journey from the recognition of individual instances of beauty to the ideal beauty of all forms, and finally to absolute beauty itself as a sudden intuitive revelation, involves ‘progressively higher levels of being’ that require ‘a corresponding ascending scale of self-performable mental states’.<sup>75</sup> This ascent requires purification through the redirection of Eros, the moving force of the soul, away from the lower, sensible realms to the higher,

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pp. 78-79. On the political issues surrounding catasterism, see Price, Simon, ‘From Noble Funeral to Divine Cult: The Consecration of Roman Emperors’, in Cannadine, David and Price, Simon, eds., *Ritual of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 56-105; Barton, Tamsyn S., *Power and Knowledge: Astrology, Physiognomics, and Medicine under the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 39-40.

<sup>70</sup> On Platonic and Neoplatonic elements in ‘New Age’ thought, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 388.

<sup>71</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c-e, 246-257, trans. R. Hackforth, in *Dialogues*, pp. 492-502.

<sup>72</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 614b-621d, in *Dialogues*, pp. 839-844.

<sup>73</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 90a, in *Dialogues*, p. 1209.

<sup>74</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212a, trans. Michael Joyce, in *Dialogues*, p. 561. On the ‘ladder of Diotima’, see Devereux, James A., ‘The Object of Love in Ficino’s Philosophy’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun. 1969), p. 165.

<sup>75</sup> Turner, ‘Gnostic Threefold Path’, p. 343.

intelligible ones.<sup>76</sup> Turner suggests that the celestial ascent presented in the Gnostic treatises known as ‘Sethian’ finds its prototype in Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>77</sup>

Plato presents the celestial ascent as a veridical post-mortem journey, an allegory, a cosmological model, and an individual spiritual and psychological journey through progressively higher states of awareness. This effortless movement between mythic, mystical, philosophical, and psychological dimensions defies scholarly efforts to compartmentalise Plato’s understanding of the soul’s ascent. It baffled his followers as well. The celestial journey, as it is interpreted in Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, and those inscrutable products of late antiquity that Dillon calls the ‘underworld of Platonism’<sup>78</sup> – the *Chaldean Oracles* and the Platonically inclined tractates of later Gnosticism – becomes subject to fierce debates between different schools. Plotinus describes what Jonas calls an ‘intellectualised’ celestial ascent,<sup>79</sup> echoing the *nousanodia* of the *Symposium* and advising the seeker:

To attain it is for those that will take the upward path...who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent...until, passing on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled, the Pure.<sup>80</sup>

The initiate has thus ‘in perfect stillness attained isolation’.<sup>81</sup> The solitary nature of this inner journey has provoked some scholars to compare it unfavourably with the companionship,

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<sup>76</sup> Turner, ‘Gnostic Threefold Path’, pp. 344.

<sup>77</sup> For examples of ‘Sethian’ Gnosticism, see *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.1, III.1, IV.1, and BG 8502.2) [hereafter *The Apocryphon of John*], trans. Frederik Wisse, pp. 98-116; *Trimorphic Prottennoia* (NHC XIII, 1), trans. John D. Turner, pp. 461-70; *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3), trans. Antoinette Clark Wire, John D. Turner, and Orval S. Wintermute, pp. 443-52; *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII, 1), trans. John H. Sieber; *The Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII, 5), trans. James M. Robinson and Frederik Wisse; all in *Nag Hammadi Library*.

<sup>78</sup> Dillon, John, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 B.C. to A.D. 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977) [hereafter Dillon, *Middle Platonists*], p. 364.

<sup>79</sup> Jonas, ‘Myth and Mysticism’, p. 316.

<sup>80</sup> Plotinus, Ennead I.6.7, in MacKenna, Stephen, trans., *Plotinus: The Enneads* (Burdett, NY: Larson, 1992) [hereafter Plotinus], p. 70.

<sup>81</sup> Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.11, p. 708.

light, and joy of Christian mysticism.<sup>82</sup> However, as Corrigan observes, Plotinus' 'solitude' is a search for the source of identity, which is identical to the search for the source of the Good; and 'one discovers oneself when one is "most what one is"'.<sup>83</sup> Many contemporary spiritualities likewise emphasise the *locus* of the sacred in the essential identity discovered in 'inner space'.<sup>84</sup>

The gulf between the intensely introverted ascent of Plotinus and the ecstatic, visually rich theurgic ascent presented by Iamblichus in *De mysteriis* has led to lively discussions about the differences in nature, purpose and validity between philosophical and theurgic inductions of the celestial ascent.<sup>85</sup> The aim of Iamblichus' ascent, like Plotinus' *nousanodia*, is the *unio mystica*, which results in the soul becoming one with the gods and a participant in their creative and intellectual activities. But the magical and ecstatic dimensions of the theurgic ascent have proved challenging to some researchers, provoking Dodds to call *De mysteriis* 'a manifesto of irrationalism'.<sup>86</sup> In his efforts to dismiss Iamblichus as 'a magician, not a Neoplatonist',<sup>87</sup> Dodds fails to recognise a feature of *De mysteriis* that Athanassiadi carefully notes: for Iamblichus, the various celestial powers encountered during the ascent symbolise stages in the individual's spiritual progress 'towards or away from being', and should not be interpreted topographically, as though linked with particular areas of the physical cosmos.<sup>88</sup>

While Iamblichus' ascent is not entirely 'outer' in an objective sense, it is not entirely 'inner' in a subjective sense either. Shaw suggests that the ascent takes place in a *mundus*

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<sup>82</sup> Louth, Andrew, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Corrigan, Kevin, "'Solitary" Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan. 1996), pp. 34-35.

<sup>84</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 246.

<sup>85</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians* [*De mysteriis*], trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1999 [1821]). For a discussion of theurgy as distinct from philosophical meditation, see Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, pp. 76-89.

<sup>86</sup> Dodds, 'Theurgy', p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> Dodds, 'Theurgy', p. 57.

<sup>88</sup> Athanassiadi, Polymnia, 'Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 83 (1993), p. 119.

*imaginalis*, and the imagination functions as a medium that effects both the soul's attachment to the body and its return to the gods.<sup>89</sup> Iamblichus himself informs us that the imagination is 'divinely inspired, for it is stirred into modes of imagination from the Gods, not from itself, and it is utterly changed from what is ordinarily human'.<sup>90</sup> The ecstatic visions of the ascent occur in an Otherworld between the soul and the god, accessible to both through their consubstantiality.<sup>91</sup> Contemporary spiritualities refer to such realms as inner or higher 'planes of consciousness'.<sup>92</sup> Wolfson calls the imagination 'the organ that puts one into contact with spiritual realities that are perceptible to each individual according to the dominant images of one's religious and cultural affiliation'.<sup>93</sup> In both Plotinus and Iamblichus, the celestial ascent is understood as the path to a direct experience of deity. This path crosses the boundaries between 'objective' and 'subjective' as well as between God and human: a perception of unity on multiple levels which also emerges in contemporary spiritualities, and which equates the journey up with the journey inward.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.2: The ascent in Mithraic initiations

The Mithraic grades of initiation, and their relationship to the seven planets, are amply demonstrated by iconographic evidence from the second to fourth centuries CE, as well as by one extant text.<sup>95</sup> The Mithraic celestial pilgrimage is described by Celsus in the 2nd century

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<sup>89</sup> Shaw, Gregory, 'Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblichean Theurgy', *Dionysius*, Vol. 21 (Dec. 2003) [hereafter Shaw, 'Containing Ecstasy'], p. 70.

<sup>90</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 133:3-8, in Shaw, 'Containing Ecstasy', p. 62.

<sup>91</sup> On the *mundus imaginalis* as an objective Otherworld, see Merkur, Dan, 'The Otherworld as a Western Esoteric Category' [hereafter Merkur, 'Otherworld'], in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 75-94. See also Merkur, Dan, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) [hereafter Merkur, *Gnosis*], pp. 37-54; Corbin, *Avicenna*, pp. 257-270.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example, Trevelyan, Sir George, *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (London: Coventure, 1979), pp. 46-47.

<sup>93</sup> Wolfson, Elliot R., *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) [hereafter Wolfson, *Speculum*], p. 119.

<sup>94</sup> On the crossing of 'objective' and 'subjective' boundaries in contemporary spiritualities, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 224-229, 245-252.

<sup>95</sup> For textual evidence, see Metzger, Bruce M., 'St. Jerome's Testimony concerning the Second Grade of Mithraic Initiation', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (1945), p. 225. For iconographic evidence and the relationship

CE: the Mithraic symbol of the path of the soul through and out of the planetary spheres is ‘a seven-gated ladder with an eighth at the top’.<sup>96</sup> Porphyry, in the third century CE, tells us that the *mithraeum* functions as the place of initiation into a mystery of the ‘descent and exit of souls’, and is therefore designed as a ‘likeness of the universe’.<sup>97</sup> He also describes the two solstitial ‘soul gates’, through which souls enter the world at the northern tropic of Cancer and exit at the southern tropic of Capricorn.<sup>98</sup>

Beck suggests that these solstitial soul gates are points in both annual time and physical space, thereby implying that the Mithraic ascent was perceived as a veridical journey, even when undertaken by the living.<sup>99</sup> But we lack any documentary evidence that might tell us how the Mithraists experienced their initiatory ascent. We have only the testimony of Porphyry, who attributes his information to a now vanished work by the second century CE Neopythagorean philosopher Numenius.<sup>100</sup> Turcan argues that Porphyry’s interpretation tells us more about the Neoplatonic view of Mithraism than about Mithraism itself.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, Porphyry describes the *mithraeum* as a symbol, and its initiates may likewise have understood the soul gates, both planetary and solstitial, as symbols rather than

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between grades and planets, see Beck, Roger, *Planetary Gods and Planetary Orders in the Mysteries of Mithras* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) [hereafter Beck, *Planetary Gods*], pp. 1-4; Ulansey, David, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 18-19; Cumont, Franz, *The Mysteries of Mithra*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956 [1903]), pp. 120-124; Clauss, Manfred, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries*, trans. Richard Gordon (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000; originally *Mithras: Kult und Mysterien*, Munich: C. H. Beck’sche, 1990), pp. 131-38.

<sup>96</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.22, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [hereafter Origen, *Contra Celsum*], at <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen161.html>>.

<sup>97</sup> Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 6, trans. Thomas Taylor, in Porphyry, *Select Works of Porphyry* (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1994 [1823]) [hereafter Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*]. See also Beck, Roger, ‘Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel’, in Roger Beck, *Beck on Mithraism: Collected Works with New Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) [hereafter *Beck on Mithraism*], p. 56; Jackson, Howard M., ‘The Meaning and Function of the Leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism’, *Numen*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (July 1985), pp. 17-45.

<sup>98</sup> Porphyry, *De antro nympharum*, 21-22. On the possible origin of the solstitial soul gates, see Burkert, *Ancient Pythagoreanism*, p. 367.

<sup>99</sup> Beck, Roger, ‘*Qui Mortalitas Causa Convenerunt*: The Meeting of the Virunum Mithraists on June 26, A.D. 184’, in *Beck on Mithraism*, p. 358.

<sup>100</sup> On Numenius, see Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 361-379.

<sup>101</sup> Turcan, Robert, *Mithras Platonicus: Recherches sur l’Hellenisation philosophique de Mithra* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 69ff. See also Dillon, John, ‘The Platonizing of Mithra’, in John Dillon, *The Golden Chain: Studies in the Development of Platonism and Christianity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004 [1990]) [hereafter Dillon, *The Golden Chain*], Sec. XVII, pp. 79-85.

physical points of passage.

The symbolic nature of the Mithraic ascent is suggested by the fact that the planetary order of the grades does not correspond to any astronomical theory extant at the time. Beck comments that the Mithraic planetary order is ‘in a sense illegitimate’.<sup>102</sup> The ascent begins with Mercury, followed by Venus, Mars, Jupiter, the Moon, the Sun and, finally, Saturn. Beck asserts that this order originates in the traditional ‘Chaldean’ order based on the planets’ perceived distances from the Earth (Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn), since, apart from the Sun and Moon, the other heavenly bodies are set out in the usual manner.<sup>103</sup> But the order of the planets in the days of the week has been ‘interpolated’ into the Chaldean order because it is a ‘temporal’ order that modifies the classic spatial order. The three highest grades are therefore temporal, with the Moon and the Sun following Jupiter, and Saturn culminating as ‘the master of the ends of both time and space’.<sup>104</sup> The structure of the initiations is a microcosmic enactment of a macrocosmic journey through time and space, enabling the initiate to triumph over both, and to achieve freedom from the physical universe which they define.<sup>105</sup>

Whether or not this ingenious interpretation is correct, the unusual order of the Mithraic grades cannot be considered a literal representation of the physical cosmos. There are other irregular planetary orders recorded in antiquity that suggest another dimension to this ‘illegitimacy’.<sup>106</sup> For example, Saturn’s position of priority as ruler of the last celestial sphere is lost when the celestial ascent is expressed in the imagery of alchemy, an important dimension of the Hermetic texts emerging in Greco-Roman Egypt at the same time

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<sup>102</sup> Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p. 2.

<sup>103</sup> Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p. 8.

<sup>104</sup> Beck, *Planetary Gods*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>105</sup> Beck, *Planetary Gods*, p. 11.

<sup>106</sup> For a discussion of discrepancies between Gnostic planetary orders, see Van den Broek, Roelof, ‘The Creation of Adam’s Psychic Body in the Apocryphon of John’, in Van den Broek, Roelof and M. J. Vermaseren, eds., *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), pp. 41-42.

Mithraism was flourishing.<sup>107</sup> Celsus relates the Mithraic ‘seven-gated ladder’ to the metals corresponding to the planets: the first gate consists of lead, the second of tin, the third of copper, the fourth of iron, the fifth of a mixture of metals, the sixth of silver, and the seventh of gold.<sup>108</sup> Celsus’ planetary order from ‘below’ to ‘above’ would, according to the traditional correspondences of planets and metals, be: Saturn, Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Mercury, the Moon, and the Sun.<sup>109</sup> This planetary order is, in fact, not Mithraic at all; it is alchemical and, like the Mithraic grades, may have been understood as symbolic rather than literal.<sup>110</sup> Each stage of the soul’s alchemical journey is a process of transmutation in terms of the corresponding metal.<sup>111</sup> Saturn’s inauguration of the ascent, and the Sun’s completion of it, form a recurring theme in alchemical texts from the second century to the eighteenth: the *opus* begins with the base lead of Saturn and culminates with the spiritual gold of the Sun.<sup>112</sup> Corbin comments that the cosmic ‘dramaturgy’ of the celestial ascent is completely unrelated to any ‘prescientific’ astronomical explanation of the cosmos; it is a mode of comprehension that both transcends and precedes such external perceptions.<sup>113</sup> The celestial ascent in Mithraism may never have been envisaged as a literal journey, since the physical order of the planets is

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<sup>107</sup> On the history of Greco-Roman alchemy, see Lindsay, Jack, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Frederick Muller, 1970) [hereafter Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*]. On Hermetic alchemy, see Fowden, Garth, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) [hereafter Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*], pp. 89-91, 120-26. See also Thorndike, Lynn, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1923), pp. 193-199.

<sup>108</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.22.

<sup>109</sup> On the correspondences between the planets and the metals, see the second century CE text of Pseudo-Democritus, *The Treatise of Democritus on Things Natural and Mystical*, in Linden, Stanton J., ed., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) [hereafter *Alchemy Reader*], pp. 38-43; Linden, Stanton J., ‘Introduction’, in *Alchemy Reader*, p. 21; Proclus., *Essays and Fragments of Proclus*, ed. and trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1999 [1825]), p. 204. See also Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*, p. 176; Silberer, Herbert, *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts* (New York, NY: Dover, 1971 [1917]) [hereafter Silberer], p. 188; Scholem, Gershom, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, trans. Klaus Ottman (Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, 2006) [hereafter Scholem, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*], p. 75.

<sup>110</sup> For an unconvincing attempt to explain the irregularity of Celsus’ ‘Mithraic’ gates, see Welburn, A. J., ‘The Identity of the Archons in the “Apocryphon Johannis”’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1978), pp. 241-254; Welburn, A. J., ‘Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram’, *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (July 1981), pp. 261-287.

<sup>111</sup> See Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*, p. 35.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, *Dialogue of Cleopatra and the Philosophers*, in *Alchemy Reader*, pp. 44-45; Zosimos of Panopolis, *Of Virtue*, 1.2, in *Alchemy Reader*, p. 52; Michelspacher, Stefan, *Cabala*, in De Rola, Stanislas Klossowski, *The Golden Game: Alchemical Engravings of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) [hereafter De Rola], pp. 52-58; Hollandus, Johann Isaak, *Opera mineralia*, in Silberer, pp. 158-160.

<sup>113</sup> Corbin, *Avicenna*, p. 17.

inflexible but the stages of the soul's ascent are not. As an initiatic journey, the stages of the celestial voyage – while remaining a series of ascending stages – may thus be ordered according to the experiences of individual initiates and the hierarchy of values adopted by a particular religious community within a specific cultural context.

### 3.3: Bypassing the Gnostic archons

'The gnostic phenomenon,' warns Wilson, 'is too complex, and possessed of too many ramifications, to be pinned down to any single source or origin'.<sup>114</sup> Gnosis involves direct personal experience, and the character of Gnostic revelations is highly individualistic as well as reflecting, like Mithraism, the cultural currents of the Roman empire in the first centuries CE. Gnostic dualism, according to Couliano, is an attempt to reconcile the existence of a good creator-god with the obvious imperfections of the world.<sup>115</sup> The dualism expressed in the treatises of this religious movement covers a wide range of permutations, from the radical antic cosmic vision of Mani to the relatively procosmic perspective of the treatise known as *Marsanes*, which declares: 'In every respect the sense-perceptible world is [worthy] of being saved entirely'.<sup>116</sup> There is, however, some consistency in this plurality of dualisms. The central concern of Gnosticism, reflected in both the Nag Hammadi codices and the writings of Christian heresiologists, is the divinity of the human soul, which has fallen into this world

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<sup>114</sup> Wilson, R. McL., 'Gnosis and the Mysteries', in *Studies in Gnosticism*, p. 451. For a discussion of the various hypotheses on the origins of Gnosticism, see Couliano, Ioan P., 'The Angels of the Nations and the Origins of Gnostic Dualism', in *Studies in Gnosticism*, pp. 79-80. For an overview of Gnostic scholarship since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices, see Van den Broek, 'Gnostic Studies', pp. 41-71. For an argument in favour of abandoning the scholarly category of 'Gnosticism', see Williams, Michael Allen, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) [hereafter Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*].

<sup>115</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, p. 23.

<sup>116</sup> *Marsanes*, NHC X.5.24-26, trans. Birger A. Pearson, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 418. On Manichaean radical dualism, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 206-238; Van Oort, Johannes, 'Manichaeism: Its Sources and Influences on Western Christianity' [hereafter Van Oort, 'Manichaeism'], in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, pp. 37-51. On Sethian and Valentinian Gnosticism and their relationship with Platonic procosmic ideas, see Pearson, Birger A., *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990) [hereafter Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*], pp. 148-164; Kenney, John Peter, 'The Platonism of the *Tripartite Tractate* (NH I,5)', in Wallis, Richard T. and Jay Bregman, eds., *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) [hereafter *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*], pp. 187-206.

of birth, death, and fate, and must be reawakened in order to ascend to its spiritual home.<sup>117</sup>

Although the Gnostic ascent usually involves seven planetary archons, understood as hypostases or emanations of the unknown transcendent God, some treatises present a multitude of celestial gatekeepers, while Mani proposes only five.<sup>118</sup> Rituals such as baptism, anointing, and eucharist help to ensure the soul's safe passage through the different stages of the journey as the archons presiding over each celestial region are encountered one by one.<sup>119</sup> These archons, unlike the Mithraic planetary gods, are perceived as inherently arrogant and stupid or, at best, oppressive because of the astrological fate they impose on the suffering soul during repeated incarnations.<sup>120</sup> The soul requires the right 'seals' or ritual formulae to bypass the archons and find ultimate freedom. In a precise echo of the Orphic *lamellae*, *The Gospel of Philip* instructs the initiate to say to each of the archons: 'I am of them that are from above'.<sup>121</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas* offers a similar formula: 'If they say to you, "Where did you come from?"', say to them, "We came from the light".<sup>122</sup>

Scholarly disdain for the exuberance of Gnostic myth-making seems to originate with Plotinus: 'They hope to get the credit of minute and exact identification by setting up a plurality of intellectual Essences; but in reality this multiplication lowers the Intellectual Nature to the level of the Sense-Kind'.<sup>123</sup> Collins refers to this imaginative excess as 'narratives in the mythological mode', contrasting it with the conceptual mode of science and philosophy developed by Greek thinkers in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.<sup>124</sup> Figures such

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<sup>117</sup> See Rudolph, Kurt, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. P. W. Coxon, K. H. Kuhn, and R. McL. Wilson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987 [1977]) [hereafter Rudolph, *Gnosis*], p. 57.

<sup>118</sup> See, for example, the three hundred and sixty archons in the *Papyrus Berolinensis* 8502, 39.4-44.18, in Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 78-9. On Mani's cosmological system, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 209-236; Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 336-342.

<sup>119</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>120</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, pp. 93-96.

<sup>121</sup> *The Gospel of Philip* (Epiphanius, *Heresy* xxvi.13), in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. and ed. Montague Rhodes James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983 [1924]), p. 12. See also *The Gospel of Philip*, NHC II.3, trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 131-151.

<sup>122</sup> *The Gospel of Thomas*, NHC II.2.50, trans. Helmut Koester and Thomas O. Lambdin, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 123.

<sup>123</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* II.9.

<sup>124</sup> Collins, John J., 'Cosmos and Salvation': Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic in the Hellenistic Age', *History of Religions*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Nov. 1977) [hereafter Collins, 'Cosmos and Salvation'], p. 129. On definitions of early Greek 'scientific'

as personified Wisdom (Sophia) are an intermediate stage between myth and logic.<sup>125</sup> Gnostic portrayals of the celestial ascent, emerging five centuries after the *nousanodia* of Plato's *Symposium*, might thus be seen as a regression to the mythic mode. Myth and rationality are understood as a linear historical progression from the former to the latter, with occasional reversions, rather than as 'complementary and coexisting orientations to the world' that may occur simultaneously in any cultural context and even within the same text.<sup>126</sup> Implicit in this evolutionist approach is the assumption that the Gnostics understood the celestial ascent as a veridical post-mortem event. Rudolph states categorically that redemption is only realised by the Gnostic at the moment of death.<sup>127</sup>

However, many texts suggest that at least some Gnostics experienced their ascent not only as post-mortem salvation, but also as a state of *unio mystica* achievable during life through theurgic practices. *Marsanes* describes the magical use of vowel-consonant combinations to facilitate the ascent, reminiscent of the *voces magicae* of the 'Mithras Liturgy'.<sup>128</sup> Plotinus confirms the Gnostic predilection for 'certain melodies, certain sounds, specially directed breathings, sibilant cries, and all else to which is ascribed magical potency upon the Supreme'.<sup>129</sup> Pearson suggests that Gnostic texts such as *Marsanes* reflect the influence of Neoplatonism, presenting theurgic techniques comparable with the ascent rituals of Iamblichus and the *Chaldean Oracles*.<sup>130</sup> In the *Cologne Mani Codex*, the living initiate experiences an alteration bordering on deification: 'My mind was transformed, and I became

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thought, see also Lloyd, G. E. R., *Magic, Reason and Experience: Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Tambiah, pp. 8-11.

<sup>125</sup> Collins, 'Cosmos and Salvation', p. 130.

<sup>126</sup> Tambiah, p. 110.

<sup>127</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis*, p. 171.

<sup>128</sup> *Marsanes*, NHC X.1.30.3-18, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 422-23.

<sup>129</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* II.9.14. For another example of *voces magicae* in Gnostic literature, see *The Gospel of the Egyptians*, NHC III.2.44-66, trans. Alexander Böhlig and Frederik Wisse, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, pp. 197-204.

<sup>130</sup> Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, pp. 149 and 160; Pearson, Birger A., 'Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus' Conception of Theurgy', in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, pp. 261-262.

like one of the greatest angels'.<sup>131</sup>

Jonas views the shift from Gnostic myth to later Christian mysticism as a movement toward interiorisation rather than conceptualisation. The objective representation of myth usually precedes the mystical stage, and later, internalised forms of the celestial journey are a psychological technique of inner transformation: an 'ascending scale of mental states' which replaces the veridical ascent through the heavenly spheres.<sup>132</sup> In Jonas' view, this transition occurs, not in post-Enlightenment secularised Western society, but in early Christianity. Jonas also acknowledges that both expressions can appear within the same cultural framework, because both the mythic ascent and its transposition into the 'inwardness of the person' spring from a common root: a way of being in the world that either successively or simultaneously manifests itself in both modes of perception.<sup>133</sup> Although Jonas concedes that the idea of the celestial ascent, whatever its mode of portrayal, is a characteristic human response to an existential human condition, he nevertheless assumes that the mythic mode of thought is literal. Gilhus, in contrast, asserts that the Gnostics intended the recitation of their elaborate cosmologies to invoke and sustain a process of change and transformation in the listener: a process that occurs 'on the psychological level'.<sup>134</sup> Myth, in at least some Gnostic circles, was understood as symbolic, and its recitation constitutes a form of theurgy.

The celestial regions represented by the archons are sometimes referred to as the 'hypostatized thoughts of God'.<sup>135</sup> each region is also a state of mind. In *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, Ialdabaoth, the eldest and most powerful of the celestial gatekeepers, is given

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<sup>131</sup> *Cologne Mani Codex*, 51.5-6, in Quispel, Gilles, 'Transformation through Vision in Jewish Gnosticism and the Cologne Mani Codex', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (May 1995), p. 189.

<sup>132</sup> Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism', pp. 315-317.

<sup>133</sup> Jonas, 'Myth and Mysticism', p. 315.

<sup>134</sup> Gilhus, Ingvild Saelid, 'Gnosticism: A Study in Liminal Symbolism', *Numen*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (July 1984) [hereafter Gilhus], p. 110.

<sup>135</sup> Newbold, William Romaine, 'The Descent of Christ in the *Odes of Solomon*', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (1912) [hereafter Newbold, 'Descent of Christ'], p. 173.

charge of the seventh heaven, ‘below the veil between Above and Below’.<sup>136</sup> When he glimpses the splendour of the eighth sphere of the constellations that lies above him, and perceives the glorious Angel of Wrath who bars his entry,

He envied him; and the envy became an androgynous product; and this was the origin of Envy. And Envy engendered Death; and Death engendered his offspring and gave each of them charge of its heaven; and all the heavens of Chaos became full of their multitudes.<sup>137</sup>

Here the great Ialdabaoth, personification of the planet Saturn, is presented as the image of an inner experience understood to be the most profoundly destructive of all human emotional states. The passage through Ialdabaoth’s domain is echoed in the alchemical stage of transmutation known as *nigredo* or ‘blackening’: a stage of suffering and darkness over which Saturn ‘reigns’.<sup>138</sup> Some parallels in the modern world are worth noting here, because they make clear the continuity of this originally astrological idea. Ialdabaoth is recognisable in the Dweller on the Threshold described in modern occultism, who ‘asks a question of the soul upon the answer to which hangs his fate...Shall he be turned back on to the planes of form, or shall he be permitted to pass on into the Light?’<sup>139</sup> In the initiation rituals of the late nineteenth century Order of the Golden Dawn, Saturn is called ‘prince of spiritual initiation through suffering and of strife against evil’.<sup>140</sup> Modernity has apparently transformed the archon from an evil cosmic entity to a psychological mirror that holds up to the ascending soul the recognition of its own corruptibility. The encounter with Ialdabaoth also resembles the confrontation with the ‘shadow’ in the psychological process Jung calls ‘individuation’.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, NHC II.4.95, [hereafter *Hypostasis*], trans. Bentley Layton, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 158.

<sup>137</sup> *Hypostasis*, NHC II.4.96.

<sup>138</sup> Maier, Michael, *Symbola aureae mensae duodecim nationum* (Frankfurt, 1617), in Jung, *CW14*, p. 229, fn. 585.

<sup>139</sup> Fortune, Dion, *The Mystical Qabalah* (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1976) [hereafter Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*], p. 218.

<sup>140</sup> Regardie, Israel, *The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1989 [1937]) [hereafter Regardie, *Golden Dawn*], p. 447.

<sup>141</sup> On the alchemical *nigredo* and Jung’s psychological interpretation, see Jung, C. G., *Psychology and Alchemy*, *CW12* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970 [1953]), [hereafter Jung, *CW12*], paras. 333-34; Jung, *CW14*, paras. 253-54, 493-

The Gnostics seem to have understood well enough the inner nature of this ferocious *daimon* who blocks the soul's passage to freedom. Absence of the word 'psychological' in Gnostic vocabularies does not indicate lack of psychological insight.

### 3.4: The *ochêma-pneuma* or astral body

In its descent from its heavenly source, the immortal soul acquires an *ochêma-pneuma*: a 'spirit-vehicle' that joins it to its mortal body. In Neoplatonic literature, the *ochêma* fulfils three functions: it houses the soul in its descent into incarnation; it acts as the organ of sense-perception and imagination; and, through theurgic rituals, it serves as a purified vehicle for the soul's ascent to its celestial home.<sup>142</sup> The Neoplatonists credited Plato with the idea: in the *Timaeus*, the demiurge assigns each soul a star and places it 'as in a vehicle [*ochêma*]', afterward handing these souls over to the 'young gods' (the planetary deities) who fashion their bodies and the lower parts of their souls.<sup>143</sup> The motif appears again in the *Phaedrus*, in which the souls of both gods and humans are compared to charioteers riding in their *ochêmata*.<sup>144</sup> Credit for the idea was also given to Aristotle, who describes the envelope that wraps the soul before its introduction into the body as analagous to the element of the stars.<sup>145</sup> Although it is unclear whether Plato and Aristotle are postulating the existence of an astral body in the sense the Neoplatonists understood it, the *ochêma* seems to be as old as the

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94, 741; Von Franz, Marie-Louise, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980) [hereafter Von Franz, *Alchemy*], pp. 220-22. On the confrontation with the shadow, see Jung, C. G., *Aion, CW9 Part II* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974 [1959]) [hereafter *CW9ii*], paras. 13-19; Jung, C. G., *Civilization in Transition, CW10* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974 [1964]) [hereafter Jung, *CW10*], paras. 444-457.

<sup>142</sup> Finamore, John F., *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) [hereafter Finamore], p. 1.

<sup>143</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 41d-42d, in *Dialogues*, pp. 1170-71; Walker, D. P., 'The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2 (Jan-Jun 1958) [hereafter Walker, 'Astral Body'], p. 122; Van den Broek, 'Adam's Psychic Body', pp. 43-44. On the equation of the 'young gods' with the planetary deities, see Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, p. 172.

<sup>144</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-b, 247b, in *Dialogues*, pp. 493-94.

<sup>145</sup> Aristotle, *On the generation of animals*, II.736b.37-38, in *The Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 6, trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 2003 [1808]), p. 278.

celestial ascent itself.<sup>146</sup> While this ‘double’ can exist independently of any heavenly journey, the two ideas usually travel in company.<sup>147</sup> A very early version may be found in the Egyptian idea of the *ka* or *ba*, the spiritual ‘double’ that allows the King to ascend to the stars.<sup>148</sup>

The star-like vehicle is not always singular. Porphyry proposes one subtle body; Proclus, two centuries later, suggests a denser one, composed of the four elements, between the first *ochêma* and the physical body.<sup>149</sup> Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus all argue about the substance out of which the *ochêmata* are made, and whether they ‘die’ like the body or continue their existence as immortal vehicles of the soul.<sup>150</sup> A sophisticated blend of mystical and scientific thought is already evident in this concept from late antiquity, combining the central idea of the celestial ascent with the Neoplatonic idea of the *ochêmata* and the idea of ‘subtle matter’ derived from Stoic physics.<sup>151</sup> Macrobius describes seven luminous ‘envelopes’ acquired as the soul descends, each containing the attributes of the relevant planetary sphere.<sup>152</sup> In Gnostic doctrines, the *ochêmata* are viewed as the carriers of astral fate.<sup>153</sup> In *The Apocryphon of St. John*, the planetary archons create Adam’s ‘psychic body’ as a series of onion-like layers corresponding to parts of the physical body, binding the

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<sup>146</sup> For a discussion of what Plato and Aristotle ‘really’ meant, see Kissling, Robert Christian, ‘The *Ochêma-Pneuma* of the Neo-Platonists and the *De Insomniis* of Synesius of Cyrene’, *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (1922) [hereafter Kissling], pp. 318-330. See also Dodds, E. R., ‘The Astral Body in Neoplatonism’, in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*, trans. E. R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992 [1963]) [hereafter Proclus, *Elements of Theology*], pp. 316-17.

<sup>149</sup> For Teutonic and Celtic versions of the ‘double’, and its literary expressions in Europe, see Webber, Andrew J., *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>148</sup> On the *ka* as an independent spiritual vehicle, see Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 48-53; Davis, pp. 162-170; Spencer, A. J., *Death in Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 58-60; Bell, Lanny, ‘Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal *Ka*’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (October 1985), pp. 251-294; Hornung, Erik, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. John Baines (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 47.

<sup>149</sup> Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 209, p. 183, and Dodds’ commentary, pp. 306-8; Kissling, p. 323-24; Walker, ‘Astral Body’, p. 121; Couliano, *Psychanodia*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>150</sup> Finamore, pp. 11-27.

<sup>151</sup> On Stoic physics and the gradations of material substance in the cosmos, see Long, A. A. and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1: *Translation of the Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) [hereafter Long and Sedley], pp. 266-343; Sandbach, F. H., *The Stoics* (London: Duckworth, 1989 [1975]) [hereafter Sandbach], pp. 69-94.

<sup>152</sup> Macrobius, 12.13.

<sup>153</sup> See Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, p. 160.

soul to the body's desires.<sup>154</sup> The astral vehicles are seen as corruptible, and are collectively called the *antimimon pneuma* or 'counterfeit spirit'.<sup>155</sup> *Pistis Sophia* informs us that the counterfeit spirit is the 'foe of the soul', which 'contriveth and senseth all sins and the evil which the rulers of the great Fate have commanded for the soul'.<sup>156</sup> Basilides portrays the *ochêmata* as a series of planetary 'appendages' that lure the soul into evil.<sup>157</sup> Although Augustine counters this depressing interpretation of the spirit-body by asserting that it can be purified through chastity, the idea, stripped of its overt astrological cosmology, has remained embedded in Christian theology to the present day.<sup>158</sup> Zaleski suggests that Gnostic forms of the celestial ascent through the planetary spheres were ultimately retained in the doctrine of the seven cardinal sins, supporting Bloomfield's assertion that 'some kind of Soul Journey is at the basis of the concept'.<sup>159</sup>

### 3.5: The *Poimandres* and the Hermetic ascent

Hermetism, like Gnosticism, is focused on knowledge of the divine world and 'the final bliss of the soul'.<sup>160</sup> The compilation of texts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum* emerges in Greco-Roman Egypt in the first centuries CE, and many religious and philosophical currents are visible in its various treatises.<sup>161</sup> Hermetism seems to have been practiced as a living religion

<sup>154</sup> *The Apocryphon of John*, II.1.15, in *Nag Hammadi Library*, p. 107.

<sup>155</sup> See the discussion on the 'counterfeit spirit' in Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, pp. 102-105.

<sup>156</sup> *Pistis Sophia*, 111.283, trans. G. R. S. Mead, at <<http://www.gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/ps116.htm>>.

<sup>157</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II.20.372, trans. James Donaldson and Alexander Roberts, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)* [hereafter Clement, *Stromata*], at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.vi.iv.ii.xx.html>>.

<sup>158</sup> Augustine, *De civitas dei*, X.28, trans. Marcus Dods, in Schaff, Philip, ed., *St. Augustin's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf102.iv.X.1.html>>.

<sup>159</sup> Zaleski, p. 59; Bloomfield, Morton W., 'The Origin of the Concept of the Seven Cardinal Sins', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr. 1941), p. 124, fn. 17. See also Bloomfield, Morton W., *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1952) [hereafter Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins*], pp. 1-67; Wenzel, Siegfried, 'The Seven Deadly Sins: Some Problems of Research', *Speculum*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Jan. 1968), pp. 1-22.

<sup>160</sup> Van den Broek, Roelof, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism in Antiquity: Two Roads to Salvation' [hereafter Van den Broek, 'Two Roads to Salvation'], in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> On Orphic and Pythagorean contributions to the *Hermetica*, see Kingsley, Peter, 'From Pythagoras to the *Turba philosophorum*: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 57 (1994), pp. 1-13; Copenhaver, Brian P., 'Introduction', in *Hermetica*, pp. xxvi-xxix; Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy*, pp. 233-249; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 36-37, 144, 178. On Pharaonic Egyptian elements, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 14-22.

in small, dedicated communities, and was not merely discussed or written about by isolated individuals or elite schools.<sup>162</sup> As in Gnostic circles, Hermetists freely expressed individual perceptions of the celestial ascent. The number of heavenly spheres varies, and the idea of deification while still in the body, described in CH I (*Poimandres*), is contradicted in CH 10, where deification can only occur at death.<sup>163</sup> In the *Poimandres*, the celestial ascent is presented as an initiatory ritual intended to induce ecstasy, gnosis, and apotheosis during life, as well as a foretaste of the soul's post-mortem reward.

The *ochêmata* feature in these treatises as a less corrupt type of Gnostic *antimimon pneuma*. As the soul 'rushes up through the cosmic framework', it is purified of its 'garments' and 'surrenders' the vices of the planets; finally, 'stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework', the soul enters the sublime region of the Ogdoad, the eighth sphere of the fixed stars.<sup>164</sup> Merkur considers that Hermetic ascent rituals are the forerunners, both traditionally and historically, of the Western alchemical initiations of the Renaissance and early modern period; they are not mere literary tropes, but are direct experiences of gnosis.<sup>165</sup> Both Gnostic and Hermetic teachings involve complex mystical initiations arranged in particular doctrinal modes.<sup>166</sup> Fowden notes that the Hermetic initiation is not only a vision or encounter, but is an interaction between the human being and God; rebirth, as it is presented in these texts, is a 'bursting into a new plane of existence previously unattained'.<sup>167</sup> Merkur

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On the Stoic contribution *via* astrology, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, p. 91; Van den Broek, 'Two Roads to Salvation', p. 5. On Jewish contributions see Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, pp. 136-47; Pearson, Birger A., 'Jewish Elements in *Corpus Hermeticum* I (*Poimandres*)', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*, pp. 336-348. On the Platonic element, see Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 188-195. On affinities and contrasts with Gnosticism, see Quispel, Gilles, 'Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*, pp. 145-165; Mahé, Jean-Pierre, 'Gnostic and Hermetic Ethics', in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, pp. 21-36; Bregman, Jay, 'Synesius, the Hermetica and Gnosis', in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, pp. 85-98.

<sup>162</sup> Van den Broek, Roelof, 'Religious Practices in the Hermetic "Lodge": New Light from Nag Hammadi', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*, pp. 77-95.

<sup>163</sup> CH I.25-26; CH X.7; in *Hermetica*, pp. 6, 31.

<sup>164</sup> CH X.16; CH I.25-26, in *Hermetica*, p. 6, 33-34.

<sup>165</sup> Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension in Hermetic Rebirth', *Esoterica*, Vol. 1 (1999) [hereafter Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension'], p. 82.

<sup>166</sup> Merkur, 'Stages of Ascension', p. 79.

<sup>167</sup> Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 105, 108.

suggests that different varieties of mystical experience in Hermetic texts are each associated with a specific celestial region or level in the course of the ascent.<sup>168</sup>

The celestial ascent of the *Poimandres* can transform the initiate into a god or a godlike human. The idea of asceticism is emphasised: the forsaking of bodily sensations is necessary to achieve an experience of gnosis.<sup>169</sup> The inner nature of the Hermetic cosmology is made clear in CH XIII, in which Hermes instructs Tat on the twelve ‘torments’, one for each zodiac sign, which ‘torture the inward person with the sufferings of sense’.<sup>170</sup> Like Iamblichus’ ascent, the Hermetic celestial journey is simultaneously objective and subjective. The initiate of the *Poimandres* traverses the traditional seven planetary spheres, but then passes into the eighth sphere; in CH XIII, there is a *henad* of ten celestial powers, rather than a *hebdomad* of seven.<sup>171</sup> This variability emphasises the symbolic nature of these heavenly voyages. Merkur suggests that the ascent might be viewed as ‘transcendence’: freedom from the influences of astral determinism through a direct experience of the mind’s detachment from the body. It constitutes ‘an ontological change in the status of the mind’.<sup>172</sup>

The theurgic text known as the ‘Mithras Liturgy’, part of the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris found in Egypt and dated to the early fourth century CE, has been the subject of debate since its first publication in 1888. It does not fit the profile of Roman Mithraism reflected in extant archaeological remains, although Mithraism experienced several reconfigurations in its history and the papyrus may reflect such developments in Hellenistic Egypt.<sup>173</sup> However, the ‘Mithras Liturgy’ bears close similarities to the *Corpus Hermeticum*,<sup>174</sup> and it is only if the Hermetic texts are perceived solely as ‘mystical

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<sup>168</sup> Merkur, ‘Stages of Ascension’, p. 82.

<sup>169</sup> CH I.23-24 and CH XIII.10, in *Hermetica*, pp. 5, 51.

<sup>170</sup> CH XIII.7, in *Hermetica*, p. 51.

<sup>171</sup> CH XIII.10-12, in *Hermetica*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>172</sup> Merkur, ‘Stages of Ascension’, p. 84.

<sup>173</sup> Betz, pp. 23-25. For a discounting of any relationship between the ‘Mithras Liturgy’ and Mithraism, see Cumont, Franz, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003 [1909]), p. 217, n. 15.

<sup>174</sup> Betz, p. 35; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 82-87 and 168-72.

Platonism', with their astrological, magical, and alchemical components ignored, is the obvious relationship overlooked.<sup>175</sup> Betz believes that the 'Mithras Liturgy' is an early form of Hermetism, although its dating suggests that it is fully mature.<sup>176</sup> The name 'Mithras Liturgy' was assigned by Dietrich in 1903; the text refers to itself as a 'ritual of immortalisation'.<sup>177</sup> It contains instructions for a self-induced celestial ascent through the seven planetary spheres, culminating in an encounter with the solar deity Helios-Mithras and the transformation of the adept prior to the return to corporeal life. Betz comments that, while the ascension takes place in the 'mind' of the adept, it is both 'realistic' in terms of the performance of ritual acts, and 'imaginary' in terms of a journey through the planetary domains.<sup>178</sup> It is not clear what Betz means by the term 'imaginary', as distinct from 'realistic'; nor is it clear how he understands 'mind'. The use of repetitive prayer, *voces magicae*, and breathing exercises in the main body of the ritual echoes Gnostic ascent rituals, and suggests the induction of a state unlikely to have been understood by the adept as 'imaginary' except in the sense Merkur describes: the direct experience of a *mundus imaginalis* that results in an 'ontological change' in the consciousness of the initiate. In the parlance of contemporary spiritualities, the adept has become 'enlightened'.<sup>179</sup>

#### Chapter 4: The celestial ascent in Judaism and Christianity

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<sup>175</sup> On the *Corpus Hermeticum* as 'mystical Platonism', and the artificial division between 'philosophical' and 'technical' treatises, see Festugière, André-Jean, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 4 vols. (Paris: Société d'édition 'Les belles lettres', 1981), 4.200-257.

<sup>176</sup> Betz, p. 37.

<sup>177</sup> Dietrich, Albrecht, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1903); Betz, p. 28.

<sup>178</sup> Betz, p. 30.

<sup>179</sup> For the concept of enlightenment in contemporary spiritual literature, see, for example, Free John, Bubba, *The Enlightenment of the Whole Body* (Middletown, CA: Dawn Horse Press, 1978); Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, *The Ultimate Alchemy* (Bombay: Anand-Shila Publications, 1974). For a critical discussion of this concept, see Feuerstein, Georg, *Holy Madness: The Shock Tactics and Radical Teachings of Crazy-Wise Adepts, Holy Fools, and Rascal Gurus* (London: Penguin/Arkana, 1991), pp. 172-184.

#### 4.1: *Merkabah* mysticism and the seven celestial palaces of God

The Greek word *apokalypsis* means ‘revelation’ or ‘uncovering’. Collins describes the literary genre as a type of narrative text in which an otherworldly being mediates to a human recipient a revelation disclosing a transcendent reality both temporal, since it involves some form of eschatological salvation, and spatial, since it involves a divine or supernatural world.<sup>180</sup> Most, although not all, early Jewish apocalypses describe a celestial ascent. The oldest known apocalypse – 1 Enoch or *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch* – is dated to the third century BCE, and is related to the biblical ascent of Enoch in Genesis 5:24.<sup>181</sup> This apocalypse does not imply a duality of soul and body, nor concede any consubstantiality between the human soul and God. Although Enoch is transformed into an angel, the ascent is a *somanodia* or bodily apotheosis, and the transformation is final.<sup>182</sup>

Later Jewish apocalypses, from the second century BCE to the first two centuries CE, relate the ascents of living individuals who undergo some form of transformation but return to earth. Idel comments that these apocalypses represent a dramatic shift from the dominant biblical point of view.<sup>183</sup> It is a human, not God, who takes the initiative for the encounter with the divine, and the heavens, rather than an elevated mountain, provide the scene of the mystical revelation. Some apocalyptic texts have undergone Christian rescensions, but retain their ascent narratives.<sup>184</sup> Within Judaism, these works are related to a corpus of texts that fully embrace the celestial ascent of the soul of a living person. The magical rituals known as *merkabah* (chariot) mysticism, emerging in Palestine between the third and eighth centuries

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<sup>180</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse*, p. 9.

<sup>181</sup> Couliano, *Out of This World*, pp. 158-159; Himmelfarb, pp. 9-28; Collins, John J., ‘A Throne in the Heavens: Apotheosis in Pre-Christian Judaism’, in *Death, Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys*, pp. 45-49.

<sup>182</sup> On another biblical example of *somanodia*, see Daniel 12:3, and comments on this text by Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 262-266. On the term *somanodia*, see Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 27.

<sup>183</sup> Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 29.

<sup>184</sup> For a survey of both Jewish and Christian apocalypses, see Himmelfarb, pp. 29-71.

CE, derive their name and primary image from the vision of God's throne-chariot in Ezekiel 1.<sup>185</sup> These texts, which involve contact with, and even influence over, celestial entities through the use of theurgy, are known as *hekhlot* (palace) literature because of the palaces of heaven through which the soul journeys to reach the divine throne.<sup>186</sup> Related to the *hekhlot* texts is the prototype of the medieval Kabbalah, the *Sefer Yetsira* ('Book of Formation'), dated to the early sixth century CE.<sup>187</sup> Like the *hekhlot* literature, it is concerned with the soul's ascent to the celestial throne. In *Sefer Yetsira*, the ten *sefirot* of the Kabbalah first make their appearance as the mysterious hypostases of God, which generate the vast and complex variety of forms and levels inherent in the cosmos.<sup>188</sup> *Sefer Yetsira* presents an idea unique in early Judaism: an understanding of the mysteries of creation through *devekut* (cleaving), a full union with, rather than merely a vision of, God.<sup>189</sup>

Similarities between the *hekhlot* literature and Hermetic and Gnostic texts generated within the same cultural milieu have been discussed by many scholars.<sup>190</sup> While the number of heavens in early apocalyptic literature is variable, the ascent to the *merkabah* involves a journey through seven celestial spheres, with a palace at each level. There is considerable

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<sup>185</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, p. 512. For the dating of these texts, see Schäfer, Peter, *The Hidden and Manifest God: Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism*, trans. Aubrey Pomerance (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992) [hereafter Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*], pp. 5-8.

<sup>186</sup> Although no English translation yet exists of the *hekhlot* literature, German translations are available in Schäfer, Peter, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur: Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Schäfer, Peter, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Schäfer, Peter, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989). For summaries of the main *hekhlot* texts, see Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*. On the various shades of meaning of the word *hekhala* (plural, *hekhlot*), see Himmelfarb, p. 14. On *hekhlot* texts involving the magical summoning of angels, see Lesses, 'Speaking with Angels'; Swartz, Michael D., "'Like the Ministering Angels": Ritual and Purity in Early Jewish Mysticism and Magic', *AJS Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1994) [hereafter Swartz, 'Ministering Angels'], p. 139. On the magical use of hymns in the fourth to sixth century CE text *Hekhalot Rabbati*, see Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, pp. 81-83.

<sup>187</sup> Ben Joseph, Rabbi Akiba, *The Book of Formation or Sepher Yetzirah*, ed. A. E. Waite and R. A. Gilbert, trans. Knut Stenring (York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 2004).

<sup>188</sup> On the *sefirot* in *Sefer Yetsira*, see Scholem, Gershom, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987) [hereafter Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*], pp. 24-35.

<sup>189</sup> Faivre, 'Sources', pp. 21-22. For a discussion on *devekut* as *unio mystica*, see Idel, Moshe, *Kaballah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988) [hereafter Idel, *New Perspectives*] pp. 46-73. For a discussion of *devekut* as distinct from *unio mystica*, see Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', p. 35.

<sup>190</sup> See, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 73-5; Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 16; Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 75-77; Faivre, 'Sources', p. 22; Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, p. 42.

disagreement about the origin of the seven heavens in these early Jewish mystical texts.<sup>191</sup> While routes of transmission are clearly important, equally relevant is the way in which these ascents were perceived by their narrators. Although Schäfer warns that *hekhalot* literature is not a unity and ‘cannot be explained uniformly’,<sup>192</sup> debates have arisen over whether the *merkabah* ascents were experienced as veridical or symbolic.<sup>193</sup> *Merkabah* mysticism was a closed esoteric tradition, transmitted from rabbi to disciple.<sup>194</sup> Theurgic techniques include fasting, singing, mantra-like prayers, *voces magicae* consisting of strings of divine and angelic names, magical amulets, and the specific posture of placing the head between the knees.<sup>195</sup> Purification is essential, not because the body is viewed as evil, but because God and his angels are fastidious.<sup>196</sup>

Idel believes that a form of astral vehicle is indicated in *hekhalot* texts describing the presence of the adept in two places at once: the body remains on earth in a kind of trance-state, while the soul in its *ochêma* traverses the heavens, witnessing the glory of God.<sup>197</sup> The idea of an *ochêma* in this early form of Jewish mysticism may reflect Neoplatonic and

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<sup>191</sup> For arguments in favour of a Babylonian scheme of three heavens evolving into a Hellenistic scheme of seven heavens, see Morray-Jones, C. R. A., ‘Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul’s Apostolate. Part 2: Paul’s Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (July 1993) [hereafter Morray-Jones], p. 278; Couliano, *Psychonadia*, pp. 27-28. On the Babylonian cosmology of three heavens, see Lambert, W. G., ‘The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon’ [hereafter Lambert], in *Ancient Cosmologies*, pp. 56-60. For arguments in favour of a Babylonian scheme of seven heavens, see Wright, *Early History of Heaven*, p. 144. For arguments against a planetary basis for the seven heavens in early Jewish mystical literature, see A. Collins, ‘Seven Heavens’. On the astrological significance of the *Sepher Yetsira*, see Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 30-31. On astrological themes in early Judaism, see Greenfield, J. C. and M. Sokoloff, ‘Astrological and Related Omen Texts in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July 1989), pp. 201-214; Charlesworth, James H., ‘Jewish Astrology in the Talmud, Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Early Palestinian Synagogues’, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 70, No. 3/4 (July-October 1977), pp. 183-200; Von Stuckrad, Kocku, ‘Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity: A New Approach’, *Numen*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-40.

<sup>192</sup> Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, p. 152.

<sup>193</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of these debates, see Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 108-124.

<sup>194</sup> Gruenwald, Ithamar, *From Apocalypticism to Gnosticism: Studies in Apocalypticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1988), p. 63.

<sup>195</sup> On the close resemblance between *merkabah* techniques, Gnostic rituals, and the Greco-Egyptian magical papyri, see Scholem, Gershom, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), pp. 74-83; Smith, Morton, ‘Observations on *Hekhalot Rabbati*’, in Altmann, Alexander, ed., *Biblical and Other Studies*, Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies, Brandeis University, Studies and Texts, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 150-59; Lesses, ‘Speaking with Angels’, p. 45.

<sup>196</sup> Swartz, ‘Ministering Angels’, pp. 159-162.

<sup>197</sup> Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 32.

Gnostic doctrines, since all three religious currents belong to the same cultural milieu.<sup>198</sup> An interpretation of the *merkabah* ascent as a contemplation of ‘the inner chambers of one’s own consciousness’ is recorded in the early eleventh century by the Babylonian rabbinic leader Hai Gaon.<sup>199</sup> The *merkabah* mystic ‘gazes into their inner rooms and chambers, as if seeing the seven palaces with his own eyes’.<sup>200</sup> Segal proposes that Hai Gaon understands the ascent as ‘an internal, intrapsychic one.’<sup>201</sup> How the *merkabah* mystics themselves understood it remains an open question. Although Paul is uncertain whether he was ‘in the body or out of the body’, he may have experienced a typical *merkabah* ascent, and the vision of God’s glory, which he identifies with Christ, provides him with justification for his claim to apostolic authority.<sup>202</sup> It is possible that some *merkabah* adepts were not confused about the unitive nature of their experiences.

Scholem notes that, in later *hekhalot* literature, the stages of the ascent are equated with degrees of moral perfection. The earlier *merkabah* mystic fixes his gaze on God, not on self-development. Scholem sees this shift as ‘a temptation to regard man himself as the representative of divinity, his soul as the throne of glory’; it is alien to the spirit of the older *hekhalot* literature.<sup>203</sup> This observation resembles some critiques of the self-focused nature of ‘New Age’ religiosity.<sup>204</sup> The uniquely innovative nature of contemporary spiritualities, according to Hanegraaff, lies in the belief that the real God ‘transcends the ontological framework which distinguishes an objective metaphysical reality from merely subjective

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<sup>198</sup> On cultural similarities and pressures in Judaism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism, see Segal, Alan F., ‘Hellenistic Magic: Some Questions of Definition’, in *Studies in Gnosticism*, p. 375.

<sup>199</sup> Wolfson, *Speculum*, p. 110.

<sup>200</sup> Translation of Hai Gaon, *Otzar ha-Geonim*, 4.2.1, in Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*. See also the translation in Halperin, David J., *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1980), p. 3.

<sup>201</sup> Segal, Alan F., ‘Paul and the Beginning of Jewish Mysticism’ [hereafter Segal, ‘Paul’], in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, p. 98.

<sup>202</sup> Morray-Jones, p. 274-276. On the special powers granted by the *merkabah* ascent, see also Tabor, James D., *Things Unutterable: Paul’s Ascent to Paradise in its Graeco-Roman, Judaic and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), p. 23.

<sup>203</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 79.

<sup>204</sup> On the subjective and personal nature of ‘New Age’ spirituality, see Heelas, Paul and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 12-32.

impressions belonging to the psyche'.<sup>205</sup> 'New Age' ideas thus involve gnosis as both self-knowledge and knowledge of God.<sup>206</sup> But the *merkabah* mystics of late antiquity, like Plotinus with his solitary *nousanodia*, also seem to have perceived the gnosis of the celestial ascent as simultaneously self-knowledge and God-knowledge. The ascent is interpreted as an inner journey to the throne of one's own immortal soul; the angelic gatekeepers of each celestial sphere reflect moral challenges which the initiate must meet; and the vision of the *merkabah* is an ecstatic mystical union with the Self.

#### 4.2: The ten *sephirot* and the Tree of Life

The Kabbalah, emerging at the beginning of the twelfth century, encompasses an extensive and complex body of literature that contains many contradictions and has undergone many transformations.<sup>207</sup> Its historiography, extending from the Renaissance to the present, offers a wide variety of interpretive approaches and scholarly *agenda*.<sup>208</sup> Idel distinguishes between 'theosophical-theurgic' and 'ecstatic' trends in Kabbalistic literature, reflecting 'different types of religiousness'.<sup>209</sup> In both trends, the goal is to instruct the mystic in the way to ascend to the 'infinite realm of the supreme Godhead'.<sup>210</sup> The theosophical-theurgic approach is concerned with the structure of the divine world and the rituals necessary to contribute to the state of cosmic harmony. The ecstatic trend is concerned with the *devekut* of the individual, who becomes 'a receptacle of divine emanation and energy'.<sup>211</sup> Like the

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<sup>205</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 225.

<sup>206</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 405.

<sup>207</sup> For Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Gnostic elements in early Kabbalah, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 2-7; Idel, *Ascensions*, pp. 167-203; Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 160-63, 322-323; Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 115-118; Scholem, Gershom, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1991) [hereafter Scholem, *Mystical Shape*], pp. 25, 58; Dan, Joseph, 'Christian Kabbalah: From Mysticism to Esotericism' [hereafter Dan, 'Christian Kabbalah'], in *Western Esotericism*, p. 124. On Neopythagorean elements, see Scholem, Gershom, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1969) [hereafter Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*], p. 167; Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 256.

<sup>208</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Kabbalistic scholarship, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 1-16.

<sup>209</sup> Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. xi.

<sup>210</sup> Dan, 'Christian Kabbalah', p. 121.

<sup>211</sup> Idel, Moshe, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988) [hereafter Idel,

apotheosis of the Hermetic ascent, ecstatic *devekut* can confer a kind of divinity.<sup>212</sup> But even the more sober theosophical Kabbalah uses ecstatic images: the late thirteenth century *Sefer Ha-Zohar* speaks of the soul's entry into the 'chamber of love' where, like a daughter, it receives God's kiss as the seal of the highest state of bliss.<sup>213</sup>

The core of theosophical Kabbalah is *ma'aseh bereshit*, the 'secret of genesis': the nature and dynamic interaction of the ten *sephirot*, the divine emanations of God that generate, and are embedded in, the hierarchical levels of the universe portrayed in the symbolic image of the Tree of Life. The celestial ascent, from this perspective, is not intended merely as a sublime individual experience, but is a dynamic attempt to maintain the harmony of this world 'in the best status quo'.<sup>214</sup> The work is ongoing: through the ritual prayer called *kavvanah*, humans become co-creators with God in the construction and perpetuation of divine harmony on the different levels of reality symbolised by the Tree.<sup>215</sup> Because *kavvanah* follows the cosmic process of creation in reverse, from the base of the Tree to its crown, the adept moves through all ten spheres of divine emanation, effecting not only self-transformation, but a transformation of each successive level of the cosmos. Ascent through the practice of *kavvanah* occurs in an Otherworld; the Kabbalistic term *olam hademut* can in fact be translated as *mundus imaginalis*.<sup>216</sup>

*Kavvanah* may be related to the visualisation techniques utilised, not only in Neoplatonism and Eastern Christian monastic mysticism, but in many contemporary spiritual healing practices.<sup>217</sup> The celestial ascent in Kabbalistic thought is intimately linked with

*Ecstatic Kabbalah*], p. 19.

<sup>212</sup> On the transformation of the adept in ecstatic Kabbalah, see Idel, *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 8-11.

<sup>213</sup> *Sefer Ha-Zohar* II.97a, 146b, in Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 226.

<sup>214</sup> Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 183.

<sup>215</sup> On *kavvanah*, see Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 132-33; Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. xviii; Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', p. 34.

<sup>216</sup> Idel, *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 73.

<sup>217</sup> On visualisation in contemporary healing practices, see, for example, Gawain, Shakti, *Creative Visualization* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982 [1979]); Green, Marian, *Experiments in Aquarian Magic: A Guide to the Magical Arts and Skills that will unlock the Secrets of the 'Gods for the Future'* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985).

theurgic methods involving the imagination. Based on the magical power of numbers and names as embodiments of the divine potencies, *kavvanah* is ‘a silken cord with the aid of which the mind gropes its dangerous way through the darkness towards God’.<sup>218</sup> Scholem suggests that the various stages of the ascent can also be called a descent into ‘the deepest recesses of the soul’.<sup>219</sup> A form of *ochêma*, called the *tselem*, appears in the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*.<sup>220</sup> The Kabbalistic *tselem* may be related to the Sufi idea of the ‘perfected nature’, the divine essence of the individual manifesting as an angelic guide, and it also echoes the spiritual ‘twin’ and celestial guide in Mani’s Gnostic cosmology.<sup>221</sup> The *tselem* can be invoked through Kabbalistic theurgy: it is both the divine intellect in the human being, and the angel who offers protection and guidance.<sup>222</sup> This conflation of veridical and symbolic is a highly sophisticated perception of the drama of the celestial ascent occurring on multiple levels of reality.

#### 4.3: The Kabbalistic ascent in modern occultism

The Kabbalah, in all its rich variety, continues as a living tradition within Judaism, and often utilises modern terminology and psychological models as modes of exegesis. The celestial ascent is clearly expressed by Halevi as an inner spiritual journey:

Step by step the aspirant slowly climbs the Tree of himself. In this way he continually balances and perfects each stage, passing from sefirah to sefirah...In this way the ascent is safely made from Earth to Heaven while the man is still in the flesh.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 276. On types of Kabbalistic theurgy, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 173-199.

<sup>219</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 276.

<sup>220</sup> Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, p. 252-55.

<sup>221</sup> On the ‘perfected nature’ as angelic guide, see Corbin, *Avicenna*, pp. 90-91. On Mani’s idea of the angelic ‘twin’, see Van Oort, ‘Manichaeism’, p. 41. On Mani’s exposure to Jewish religious currents, see Van Oort, ‘Manichaeism’, p. 39. For Sufi elements in the Kabbalah, see Idel, *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 73-89.

<sup>222</sup> Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, p. 256.

<sup>223</sup> Halevi, Z’ev ben Shimon, *Adam and the Kabbalistic Tree* (London: Rider, 1974), p. 272.

But the Kabbalistic ascent has also entered contemporary non-Jewish occultism through the appropriation of Kabbalistic literature during the Renaissance by Christian Neoplatonists such as Johannes Reuchlin and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Recognising older Neoplatonic elements embedded in the texts, they believed it to be part of the revealed tradition of the *prisca theologia* or ‘perennial philosophy’ first passed down from Moses.<sup>224</sup> Although this appropriation distorted the meaning of many Kabbalistic works, the consequences were far-reaching: the Kabbalah, now viewed as a body of texts attesting to the veracity of the Trinity, exercised immense influence on Western Christian esoteric currents into the modern era.<sup>225</sup> Speculative Freemasonry, originating in the seventeenth century, did not allow Jews into its lodges, but it absorbed many ideas from Christianised Kabbalah, such as the magical power of words and numbers related to the inner life of the Godhead.<sup>226</sup> Such Kabbalistic speculation has remained a feature of the higher degrees of modern Freemasonry into the present.<sup>227</sup> The combination of Kabbalistic theosophy and Masonic initiation structures was introduced into the initiation rituals of the late nineteenth century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the various twentieth century offshoots that emerged from it. The idea of the celestial ascent of the soul, clothed in the symbolism of the Kabbalistic *sefirot* and interacting with Christian Theosophical precepts, Masonic initiations, and scientific, social, and psychological paradigms emerging in the late nineteenth century, has generated an entirely new kind of heavenly journey.

Violet Firth (1890-1946), better known as Dion Fortune, acquired her introduction to the Kabbalah from Theosophy and an offshoot of the Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>228</sup> Fortune

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<sup>224</sup> Masters, G. Mallary, ‘Renaissance Kabbalah’ [hereafter Masters], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 138. On the *prisca theologica*, see Walker, D. P., *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1972).

<sup>225</sup> Dan, Joseph, ‘Christian Kabbalah’, p. 119.

<sup>226</sup> Mazet, Edmond, ‘Freemasonry and Esotericism’ [hereafter Mazet], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, pp. 252-53.

<sup>227</sup> Mazet, p. 267.

<sup>228</sup> For biographical information on Dion Fortune, see Richardson, Alan, *Priestess: The Life and Magic of Dion Fortune* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1987); Chapman, Janine, *Quest for Dion Fortune* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1993). On her religious proclivities, also see Hutton, Ronald, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan*

asserts that Kabbalism comprises the foundation of modern Western occultism: all esoteric wisdom – including the system of Pythagoras – is declared to spring from this ancient source.<sup>229</sup> The celestial ascent is incorporated into this special form of modern Christian Kabbalah through contemplative techniques based on medieval Jewish *kavvanah*. Fortune informs us, ‘If a man meditates upon a symbol around which certain ideas have been associated by past meditation, he will obtain access to those ideas’.<sup>230</sup> These symbols are the ten *sephirot*: not only grades of initiation and stages on the soul’s celestial ascent, but also ‘potencies’ that can be manipulated by the adept. Each *sephira* represents a cosmic force, and when the mind concentrates on it, it establishes a contact with that force: a ‘channel in consciousness’ has been made between the conscious mind of the individual and a particular potency or attribute of the world-soul.<sup>231</sup> Fortune’s Kabbalah is a heady mix, incorporating the psychology of Freud and Jung, Christian mysticism, Theosophical ‘higher planes’, the imagery of the Tarot, the planets and zodiacal signs of Hellenistic astrology, and even the seven celestial palaces of *merkabah* mysticism. The celestial ascent has transformed into a process of graded spiritual empowerment, facilitated by magical rituals interpreted according to psychological models, and achieved by linking the individual to the great archetypal forces represented by the hierarchy of the *sephirot* on the Tree of Life.

Fortune’s Kabbalah is the work of a practical occultist using esoteric methods of exegesis.<sup>232</sup> A. E. Waite (1857-1942) produced a more scholarly tome on the Kabbalah, including a lengthy history of its development and an interpretation of its meaning based on Christian Theosophical models.<sup>233</sup> In a process of circular logic, the Theosophical understanding of the soul’s ascent is used as a form of hermeneutics to interpret what is

*Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1999]) [hereafter Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*], pp. 180-183.

<sup>229</sup> Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*, p. 4.

<sup>230</sup> Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*, p. 5.

<sup>231</sup> Fortune, *Mystical Qabalah*, p. 18.

<sup>232</sup> On esoteric methods, see Riffard, pp. 65-71.

<sup>233</sup> Waite, A. E., *The Holy Kabbalah* (New York, NY: University Books, 1960) [hereafter Waite, *Kabbalah*].

deemed to be one of its own ancestral foundation stones. Waite speaks of an ascent in ‘grades of sanctity’,<sup>234</sup> and declares: ‘There are Seven Palaces on high containing the Mystery of Faith, and I understand these as seven stages of union, like a tower going up to God’.<sup>235</sup> Waite insists that the soul’s journey through these Palaces is ‘symbolic’, but they seem to be more concrete to him than the seven *hekhlot* were to the *merkabah* mystics, and are redolent of the stern morality of Waite’s own Catholic background.<sup>236</sup> The chief difference between the approaches of these major figures in the modern ‘occult revival’ seems to be similar to the tension Scholem and Idel describe in medieval and Renaissance Kabbalistic currents. For Waite, the celestial ascent is a potent image of the soul’s yearning for the bliss of the *unio mystica*. For Fortune, it is a means of acquiring the power to influence the evolution, not only of the individual, but of the world.

#### 4.4: Ascent to Christ

Jesus’ ascent to heaven after his crucifixion constitutes a Christian portrayal of the celestial ascent of the soul. All other ascents are thereby rendered obsolete: where once any Mithraic, Gnostic, or Hermetic adept could seek revelation and transformation through the heavenly journey, now these can be found only in Christ. Grese suggests that the exclusivity of Jesus’ claim in John 3.1-12 – ‘And no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the son of man’ – explicitly rejects the claims of Jewish apocalyptic and *hekhlot* literature, as well as Hermetic and Gnostic celestial voyages.<sup>237</sup> The idea of the celestial ascent lies at the heart of Christian theological doctrine, but the belief that anyone

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<sup>234</sup> Waite, pp. 244-5.

<sup>235</sup> Waite, *Kabbalah*, p. 247.

<sup>236</sup> For biographical information on Waite, see Gilbert, R. A., *A. E. Waite: Magician of Many Parts* (Wellingborough: Crucible, 1987); Waite, A. E., *Shadows of Life and Thought: A Retrospective Review in the Form of Memoirs* (London: Blount, 1938).

<sup>237</sup> Grese, William C., ‘“Unless One is Born Again”: The Use of a Heavenly Journey in John 3’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 107, No. 4 (Dec. 1988) [hereafter Grese], p. 678.

other than Jesus can make the journey – except through the resurrection of the body on the Last Day – has suffered periodic condemnations, in part because of the ‘politics of monotheism’, and in part because of implications of the divinity of the heavens and the soul’s pre-existence and consubstantiality with God.<sup>238</sup> Nevertheless, ideas with vigour can adapt according to individual and cultural requirements, even within apparently unsympathetic religious contexts, which may themselves be transformed.

In Eastern Christianities, the scriptural canon was slow to achieve a fixed form, and the Hellenic celestial ascent is discernible in Alexandrian, Cappadocian, and Syrian Christian works of the second and third centuries CE, particularly those of Origen (185-255 CE).<sup>239</sup> Although Origen is ‘distinctly Christian’, he assumes the pre-existence of the soul, which originates in the heavens before the Fall and will return there after the resurrection.<sup>240</sup> How else, he asks, could the mind ‘perceive and understand divine truths’?<sup>241</sup> Origen also accepts the idea of the *ochêma*, since, if we are to exist in the higher realms, ‘it is essential for us to use spiritual bodies’.<sup>242</sup> The *ochêma* remains a frequent companion of the Christian celestial

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<sup>238</sup> On the ‘politics of monotheism’ and the threat that gnosis posed to early Christian authorities, see Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), pp. 28-34. On the Paris Condemnations of 1277 repudiating the Platonic idea of the divinity of the heavens, see Grant, Edward, ‘Late Medieval Thought, Copernicus, and the Scientific Revolution’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 23 (1962), pp. 197-220; Grant, Edward, ‘The Condemnation of 1277, God’s Absolute Power, and Physical Thought in the Late Middle Ages’, *Viator*, Vol. 10 (1979), pp. 211-244. On Platonic, Neoplatonic, Stoic, Gnostic, and Hermetic belief in the identity between God and the human soul, see Van den Broek, Roelof, ‘Gnosticism and Hermeticism in Antiquity’, in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, p. 1. On the disjunctions between ‘Hebraic’ and ‘Hellenic’ Christianity, see Constatas, Nicholas, ‘“To Sleep, Perchance to Dream”: The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 55 (2001) [hereafter Constatas], p. 92. On Hellenic Christianity also see Faivre, Antoine, ‘Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements’ [hereafter Faivre, ‘Sources’], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 15. For an overview of the tensions in early Christianity, see Chadwick, Henry, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002 [1966]); Fox, Robin Lane, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (London: Penguin, 1986).

<sup>239</sup> Golitzin, Alexander, ‘“Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men”: The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Niketas Stethatos, and the Tradition of “Interiorized Apocalyptic” in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol., 55 (2001) [hereafter Golitzin, ‘Earthly Angels’], p. 127.

<sup>240</sup> Scott, Alan, *Origen and the Life of the Stars: A History of an Idea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) [hereafter Scott, *Origen*], p. 116. For Jewish apocalyptic influences on Origen, see Halperin, David J., ‘Origen, Ezekiel’s Merkabah, and the Ascension of Moses’, *Church History*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (Sep. 1981), pp. 261-275. For Gnostic influences, see Scott, *Origen*, pp. 54-55. For Hermetic influences, see Scott, *Origen*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>241</sup> Origen, *De principiis*, 1.7, trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, at <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen22.html>>.

<sup>242</sup> Origen, *Psalms*, 1.5, in Scott, *Origen*, p. 156.

ascent.<sup>243</sup> It might be visualised as a naked homunculus or a bird,<sup>244</sup> but it might also be spherical.<sup>245</sup> It may also be coloured according to its predominant vices;<sup>246</sup> the seven cardinal sins are associated with specific colours originating in the symbolism of the planets.<sup>247</sup> The idea of the *ochêmata* being tinted according to the individual's passions has great continuity, reappearing in late nineteenth century conceptions of the 'subtle bodies'.<sup>248</sup>

Scott notes that, for Origen, there are two journeys: one inward, in which the soul ascends through different 'grades of perfection' during this life, and the other after death, in which it 'traverses the "many abiding places" of God...until it reaches the "father of lights"'.<sup>249</sup> Concern with the first journey dominates Origen's theology, but he could not resist speculating on the second. Origen's Gnostic predilections are suggested by the celestial powers that 'inspect the ascending soul and, under certain circumstances, would prevent it from reaching its heavenly goal'.<sup>250</sup> Clement of Alexandria (150-216 CE), who was Origen's teacher, asserts that the angels who oversee the celestial ascent ensure that souls still attached to material desires do not reach heaven; to bypass these angels, the soul must show some indication of its purity.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> See, for example, the 'body of air and light' in *Visio Baronti Monachi Longoretensis*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, ed. W. Levison, Vol. 5 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1910), pp. 368-394, in Zaleski, p. 50.

<sup>244</sup> Zaleski, p. 51. For an image of the soul as homunculus, see Emblem 7 in the alchemical text, *Rosarium Philosophorum*, in *Artis Auriferae*, II (Basel, 1593) [hereafter *Rosarium*], in Jung, C. G., *The Practice of Psychotherapy, CW16* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976 [1954]) [hereafter Jung, *CW16*], p. 269. For an image of the soul as a bird, see Emblem 11 in Trismosin, Salomon, *Splendor Solis* (1582) [hereafter Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*], in Wasserman, James, *Art and Symbols of the Occult* (London: Greenwich Editions, 1993) [hereafter Wasserman], p. 97. For the Platonic version of the winged soul, see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246, 251b, 255c, in *Dialogues*, pp. 493, 497, 501.

<sup>245</sup> See the spherical spiritual body in Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*, 1.32, trans. Henry von Essen Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1929). For the Platonic version of the sphericity of souls, see Plato, *Timaeus*, 32d-34b, 44d. For the Neoplatonic version, see Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 210, p. 185, and Dodds' commentary, pp. 308-9.

<sup>246</sup> Zaleski, p. 51.

<sup>247</sup> On the equation between sins and colours, see Bloomfield, *Seven Deadly Sins*, pp. 23, 324 fn. 191, 325 fn. 200, 438 fn. 220. For Hellenic correspondences between colours and planets, see Ptolemy, Claudius, *Tetrabiblos*, II.9, trans. F. E. Robbins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) [hereafter Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*], II.9, pp. 191-93.

<sup>248</sup> For the colours of the Theosophical 'subtle bodies' as reflections of the passions, see Leadbeater, C.W., *Man Visible and Invisible* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 2000 [1902]) [hereafter Leadbeater], pp. 65-70.

<sup>249</sup> Scott, *Origen*, p. 158.

<sup>250</sup> Origen, *In Ezech.*, Homily 7.3, in Scott, *Origen*, p. 142.

<sup>251</sup> Clement, *Stromata* 7.13.82. On Clement's Hellenism, see Faivre, 'Sources', pp. 15-16. On a work attributed to Clement describing a celestial ascent, see Howe, Herbert M., 'The Dome of Clement', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American*

The Cappadocian patrists Gregory of Nyssa (330-395 CE) and Basil of Caesarea (330-379 CE), both strongly influenced by Origen, also attempt to reconcile Hellenic and Christian ascents. Gregory describes the soul's ascent as a 'vision of the beautiful', suggesting the *nousanodia* of Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>252</sup> While the body is living, as well as after death, the soul can ascend to God, provided that it is 'lightened' through disengagement from the life of the flesh. Roth notes that Gregory interprets heaven and hell not as physical places, but as 'conditions in which souls may be found'.<sup>253</sup> Basil believes in the pre-existence of the soul, and compares the heavens to a city that exists only in the 'divine thought': a city that was 'our ancient home, our native land, from which man has fallen, and to which he can return by overcoming the effects of sin'.<sup>254</sup> The idea of heaven as a 'divine thought' rather than a 'place' makes the ascent achievable during life as a *nousanodia*, but only under conditions of stringent asceticism.

Golitzin suggests that this 'interiorized apocalyptic', incorporating elements of earlier Jewish mystical ascents as stages of a Christian inner journey, is evident in Eastern monasticism as early as the fourth century.<sup>255</sup> Conostas comments that, in the Eastern Christian religious imagination, the world beyond the grave is psychological and spiritual rather than physical: 'The Kingdom of God was a reality that promised to break through, not from a point outside the cosmos, but from within the depths of the self'.<sup>256</sup> Although Origenism was declared heretical in the Eastern empire in the mid-fifth century CE, the 'theoretical ascension', with its implicit consubstantiality between the soul and God, survived efforts to

*Philological Association*, Vol. 97 (1966), pp. 261-73. On angels as hostile gatekeepers in Jewish apocalyptic texts, see Himmelfarb, pp. 66-67; Couliano, *Out of This World*, p. 169; Swartz, 'Ministering Angels', p. 158-162.

<sup>252</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection* [hereafter Gregory of Nyssa], PG 46.89b, ed. J. G. Krabinger (Leipzig, 1837), p. 84, in Roth, Catherine P., 'Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and Resurrection', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Mar. 1992) [hereafter Roth], p. 23.

<sup>253</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, PG 46.69b-d, in Roth, p. 27.

<sup>254</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron*, 117b-120b, ed. Stanislas Biet (*Basile de Césarée, homélies sur l'hexaéméron*, Paris, 1950), in Callahan, John F., 'Greek Philosophy and the Cappadocian Cosmology', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 12 (1958) [hereafter Callahan], p. 50. On 'spiritual' cities, see also Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis*, p. 74.

<sup>255</sup> Golitzin, 'Earthly Angels', p. 144.

<sup>256</sup> Conostas, p. 123.

exterminate it. It is most clearly articulated in that form of theurgic gnosis which the fifth century CE Syrian mystic Stephen bar Sudaile calls the ‘Ascent of the Mind’.<sup>257</sup> Stephen’s visualisation exercises, comprising a series of stages leading to a gnosis of the heavenly mysteries, may be compared with, and possibly influenced, the later visualisation methods of Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>258</sup> Yates proposes that Loyola’s formation of the Jesuit Order in 1540, and his theurgic practices, were influenced by Renaissance Hermetic-Kabbalistic ideas.<sup>259</sup> But the ascent as an inner spiritual journey, induced by theurgy and enabling the ascetic to pass through progressive stages until he reaches ‘the last “pure prayer”’,<sup>260</sup> was already embedded in Eastern Christianity in late antiquity.

The interaction of the celestial ascent with early Christian asceticism has apparently shifted the cosmic setting of earlier Hellenic initiations to the ‘inner theater of the Christian soul’.<sup>261</sup> The *Passio Perpetua* (c. 203 CE) presents Perpetua’s vision of a ladder to heaven, a ‘narrow, difficult and dangerous way’ interpreted in later Christian exegeses as an image of both Christian martyrdom and the ascetic’s ascent to God.<sup>262</sup> Ramon Lull (1232-1316), whose work *Merkur* considers the ‘matrix’ of Western esotericism, uses the imagery of the celestial ascent to describe the ecstatic experience of union with the deity.<sup>263</sup> In *The Interior Castle* of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), the stages of the spiritual journey appear as a heavenly castle with seven chambers, the most central being occupied by the ‘King of Glory’.<sup>264</sup> Teresa herself interprets the seven chambers as a *scala contemplationis*, beginning with normal

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<sup>257</sup> Widengren, G., ‘Researches in Syrian Mysticism: Mystical Experiences and Spiritual Exercises’, *Numen*, Vol. 8, Fasc. 3 (Dec. 1961) [hereafter Widengren], p. 166ff.

<sup>258</sup> Widengren, pp. 175-77.

<sup>259</sup> Yates, Frances A., *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) [hereafter Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*], p. 274.

<sup>260</sup> Widengren, p. 180.

<sup>261</sup> Golitzin, ‘Earthly Angels’, p. 141.

<sup>262</sup> Graf, Fritz, ‘The Bridge and the Ladder: Narrow Passages in Late Antique Visions’, in *Heavenly Realms*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>263</sup> Merkur, *Gnosis*, p. 246. On Lull’s work, see Merkur, *Gnosis*, pp. 244-253; Yates, Frances A., *Lull and Bruno: Collected Essays*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982); Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 175-196; Hillgarth, J. N., *Ramon Lull and Lullism in fourteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>264</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. The Benedictines of Stanbrook (London: Thomas Baker, 1921), at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/castle2.txt>>.

awareness and culminating in the ecstasy of mystical union.<sup>265</sup> The interiorisation of the celestial journey, complete with the shedding of the ‘garments’ of the *ochêma*, is also apparent in the work of St. John of the Cross (1542-1591):

Any soul that will ascend this Mount...must purify itself of the remnants which the desires aforementioned have left in the soul...it must have changed its garments, which...God will change for it, from old to new, by giving it a new understanding of God in God, the old human understanding being cast aside.<sup>266</sup>

Perhaps the best known ascent in Christian literature is found in the *Paradiso* of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Dante’s cosmology is sturdily Aristotelian, following the traditional *schema* of the seven planetary spheres, the eighth sphere of the fixed stars, and the ninth sphere of the Primum Mobile.<sup>267</sup> But the Hellenic planetary gods are now blessed abodes for those saints who embody the traditional virtues of the planets: in Jupiter’s sphere, for example, Dante encounters souls conspicuous for their justice during life, and in Saturn’s sphere, he meets those who have passed their lives in holy contemplation.<sup>268</sup> Scholarly interpretations of this great poetic vision of the celestial ascent are encyclopaedic.<sup>269</sup> The *Paradiso* is a complex blend of poetry, history, politics, and theology, and different scholars emphasise different dimensions of the work.<sup>270</sup> Speaking as a fellow poet, T. S. Eliot comments that Dante ‘lived in an age in which men still saw visions’.<sup>271</sup> Couliano calls

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<sup>265</sup> Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, in *St. Teresa of Jesus: Complete Works*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), at <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/teresa/way.txt>>.

<sup>266</sup> St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.5.7, at <[http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john\\_cross/ascent.txt](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/ascent.txt)>.

<sup>267</sup> On Dante’s debt to Aristotle, see Boyde, Patrick, *Dante, Philomythes and Philosopher: Man in the Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) [hereafter Boyde, *Dante*], pp. 43-201.

<sup>268</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XVIII-XXI, trans. Laurence Binyon, in Milano, Paolo, ed., *The Portable Dante* (London: Penguin, 1975), pp. 366-546. See the discussion in Couliano, *Out of This World*, p. 230.

<sup>269</sup> For a detailed bibliography, see Boyde, *Dante*, p. 381.

<sup>270</sup> For the *Paradiso* as a theology of history, see Mazzotta, Giuseppe, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). For the *Paradiso* as humanist philosophy, see Auerbach, Erich, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago press, 1969). For Dante as a medieval allegorist, see Dronke, Peter, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>271</sup> Eliot, T. S., ‘Dante’, in Eliot, T. S., *Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1932), p. 204.

Dante's story a 'shamanistic narrative' that could have occurred in 'any space or time setting'; its sources are 'all the apocalypses'.<sup>272</sup> Dante's ascent merges inner and outer, veridical and symbolic, in a manner which may always defy attempts to categorise it.

McNamara presents a modern version of the Christian mystical path that reveals many structural similarities with ascents from late antiquity.<sup>273</sup> The journey leading to the bliss of the *unio mystica* presents seven dangers to the soul: delusion, hyperintrospection, passivity, prideful privation, 'fakirism', contempt for the world, and attraction to psychophysical phenomena.<sup>274</sup> The Gnostic archons have transformed again: no longer cardinal sins, they are now aberrant psychological states. There are also seven techniques, like the Gnostic 'seals', needed to achieve mystical union: development of full humanness, prayer, asceticism, charity, silence and solitude, spiritual guidance, and Christ-consciousness.<sup>275</sup> Clement's angelic gatekeepers, who demand proofs of perfection from the ascending soul, have likewise been psychologised, but they are still recognisable. However, although the celestial ascent may be largely interiorised within Christian cultural contexts, the experience still depends on individual predisposition as much as cultural mediation. Father Paissios of Karyes informs us that his elder, Papa Tikhon the Russian, for many years before his death in 1968, would often enter a kind of trance during the holy liturgy:

When someone once asked him what had happened, he answered in his broken Greek: 'Guardian angel take me up. Guardian angel take me back down.' 'And what did you see?' the other persisted. 'Angels, Archangels, Cherubim, Seraphim...heavenly choir...t'ousands, ten t'ousands.'<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Couliano, *Out of This World*, pp. 230-31.

<sup>273</sup> McNamara, William, 'Psychology and the Christian Mystical Tradition', in Tart, Charles T., ed., *Transpersonal Psychologies: Perspectives on the Mind from the Seven Great Spiritual Traditions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1992 [1975]) [hereafter McNamara], pp. 369-408.

<sup>274</sup> McNamara, pp. 404-405.

<sup>275</sup> McNamara, pp. 398-403.

<sup>276</sup> Golitzin, Alexander, *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain: Contemporary Voices from Mount Athos* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1996), p. 142.

## Chapter 5: The alchemical ascent and the Philosopher's Stone

### 5.1: 'Metallurgical mysticism'<sup>277</sup>

The idea that alchemical literature has always concerned a 'directed itinerary of the soul through transformations of matter' was first proposed in 1850 in Atwood's *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*.<sup>278</sup> Ancient alchemical texts which appear to discuss the transmutation of base metals into gold are, according to Atwood's thesis, actually secret allegories of the soul's ascent to spiritual perfection. With Atwood's book, followed in 1857 by Hitchcock's *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, and in 1893 by Waite's Theosophical exegesis, the conviction was established in modern occult and Theosophical circles that alchemy had always had a soteriological goal.<sup>279</sup> Academic literature on alchemy has proliferated in the last century, and scholars have continued to debate whether Western alchemy, from the time of its origins in Hellenistic Egypt, was a spiritual or a practical discipline.<sup>280</sup> The alchemical ascent has also been 'psychologised'. Silberer's psychoanalytic interpretation of alchemical symbolism was followed by Jung's archetypal hypothesis, which likewise presents alchemy as a process of inner development projected onto the physical components of the *opus*.<sup>281</sup> Godwin, however, observes that alchemy, being 'the science of

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<sup>277</sup> The phrase is used in Bonardel, Françoise, 'Alchemical Esotericism and the Hermeneutics of Culture' [hereafter Bonardel], in Faivre, Antoine and Jacob Needleman, eds., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) [hereafter *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*], p. 73.

<sup>278</sup> Bonardel, p. 82; Atwood, Mary Anne, *A Suggestive Inquiry into 'The Hermetic Mystery', with a Dissertation on the More Celebrated Alchemical Philosophers, being an Attempt toward the Recovery of the Ancient Experiment of Nature* (New York, NY: The Julian Press, 1960 [1850]).

<sup>279</sup> Hitchcock, Ethan Allen, *Remarks upon Alchemy and the Alchemists* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003 [1857]); Waite, A. E., *Azoth; or, The Star in the East* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893) [hereafter Waite, *Azoth*].

<sup>280</sup> For an example of a 'proto-scientific' hypothesis on alchemy, see Merkur, *Gnosis*, p. 107. For examples of a spiritual hypothesis, see Eliade, Mircea, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 8; Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, p. 89; Lindsay, *Origins of Alchemy*, pp. 101-103; Raff, p. xvi; Scholem, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, pp. 40-41. For the hypothesis of a Platonic/Neoplatonic basis for alchemy, see Bonardel, p. 75; Linden, Stanton J., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) [hereafter Linden], p. 3. For relevant philosophical passages on this approach, see Plato, *Timaeus*, 27c-31b, 32c-34c, 36d-e, 47e-51b, 59b-c.

<sup>281</sup> Silberer, Herbert, *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts*, trans. Smith Ely Jelliffe (New York, NY: Dover, 1971 [1917]). For relevant volumes in Jung's *Collected Works*, see Jung, *CW12*; Jung, C. G., *Alchemical Studies*, *CW13* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) [hereafter Jung, *CW13*]; Jung, *CW14*. For subsequent Jungian literature based on

correspondences between the different levels of being', cannot be pinned down to any single definition.<sup>282</sup> Schuler, introducing a refreshing pluralism to the academic debate, suggests thinking in terms of 'alchemies': just as practical alchemy has been modified by different philosophical and scientific traditions, the idea of a 'spiritual' alchemy also varies from one cultural and religious context to another.<sup>283</sup> Even when a text unabashedly presents itself as a path of spiritual ascent, it does not represent the views of all alchemists, but reflects the individual author as well as his/her cultural milieu.

Concern with the purification of the soul is apparent in the fourth century CE writings of Zosimos of Panapolis, whose mysterious visions present the celestial ascent as a series of 'steps into the light'.<sup>284</sup> On the steps, Zosimos meets various figures associated with the planetary metals. A 'lead man' must submit himself to 'unendurable torment'; a 'brazen man' in a purple garment transforms into a 'silver man'; a man appears with a sword in his hand, followed by one 'adorned round about with signs, clad in white and comely to see, who was named the Meridian of the Sun'.<sup>285</sup> The planetary associations are traditional: lead belongs to Saturn, who begins the alchemical work with the suffering of the *nigredo*; the Jupiterian brazen man transforms into the silver of the Moon; the man with the sword is Martial; the man 'adorned round about with signs' is the Sun encircled by the ring of the zodiac.<sup>286</sup> Merkur insists that Zosimos' mystical images are allegories of chemical processes.<sup>287</sup> Lacking any evidence other than the text itself, both Merkur's assertion, and Jung's diametrically opposite assertion that Zosimos' chemical processes are allegories of an

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this thesis, see Von Franz, *Alchemy*; Edinger, Edward F., *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy* (London: Open Court, 1986).

<sup>282</sup> Godwin, Joscelyn, 'Foreword', in Faivre, Antoine, *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>283</sup> Schuler, Robert M., 'Some Spiritual Alchemies of Seventeenth-Century England', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun. 1980), p. 294.

<sup>284</sup> Zosimos, 'The Treatise of Zosimos the Divine concerning the Art', III.1.2 [hereafter Zosimos], in Jung, *CW13*, para. 86. For an alternative translation of Zosimos, see Taylor, F. Sherwood, 'The Visions of Zosimos: Translation and Prefatory Note', *Ambix*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May 1937), pp. 88-92.

<sup>285</sup> Zosimos, III.5.4, in *CW13*, para. 86.

<sup>286</sup> See the commentary in Jung, *CW13*, paras. 123-124.

<sup>287</sup> Merkur, *Gnosis*, p. 89.

inner spiritual ascent, are equally difficult to prove.<sup>288</sup> But Zosimos was the only Hellenistic alchemist known to us who was a Hermetist, and there seems to be a relationship between the celestial ascent of the *Poimandres*, Celsus' 'Mithraic' soul-gates, and the astrological-alchemical stages of Zosimos' visions.<sup>289</sup> Whatever his intent, through Zosimos the ascent through the planetary metals first enters the extant corpus of alchemical literature as 'a path where work upon matter and desire for immortality converge'.<sup>290</sup>

## 5.2: Spiritual alchemy in the Renaissance

The Western alchemies of the early modern period combine Greco-Egyptian texts appropriated by the Arab world in the seventh century CE and passed back during the Latin Middle Ages, Jewish and Christian Kabbalistic writings, Aristotelian physics and cosmology, and the newly translated Hermetic and Neoplatonic magical and philosophical corpus that became accessible to the West in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>291</sup> Whether the equation of the alchemical stages with the celestial ascent was 'added' by Sufi mystics and Renaissance Neoplatonists or was inherent from the beginning, it is full-blown in treatises from the sixteenth century onward. The astronomical revolution inaugurated by Copernicus and Galileo constitutes a vast paradigm shift in Western culture that inevitably contributed to the relocation of the celestial ascent from a heavenly framework to one based on the idea of a God immanent in the whole of Nature. But since interpretations of the celestial ascent as an inner spiritual journey are already evident in antiquity, the substitution of planetary metals for planetary spheres alters the imagery and context, but not the structure of the idea.

Alchemical texts sometimes disagree about the number of stages involved in the

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<sup>288</sup> Jung, *CW13*, paras. 119-120, 142.

<sup>289</sup> See Merkur, *Gnosis*, p. 94.

<sup>290</sup> Bonardel, p. 74.

<sup>291</sup> Linden, p. 8; Yates, Frances A., *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 12-17; Shumaker, *Occult Sciences*, pp. 160-170.

*opus*.<sup>292</sup> Seven tends to be the favourite, portrayed in the illustrative engravings or ‘emblems’ of many alchemical works. Lamsprincck’s *De lapide philosophico* (1625) portrays the ascent *via* a staircase of seven steps, culminating in the figure of the King, symbolising the Philosopher’s Stone, seated on his throne.<sup>293</sup> Mylius’ *Anatomia auri* (1628) presents the ascent as a tree, with the seven planetary gods on successive branches and Hermes Trismegistus, the semi-divine sage and teacher of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, seated at the top.<sup>294</sup> In *Opus medico-chymicum* (1618), Mylius uses a more complex image to express the universal correspondences of the ascent: seven trees, each marked with the glyph of one of the planets, surround the figure of the alchemist, while the same planetary glyphs appear in the heavens marking the celestial spheres.<sup>295</sup> Above them is the angelic realm, with the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, the ‘one true name of God’, at the top.<sup>296</sup> In Michelspacher’s *Cabala* (1616), a staircase rises into heaven, each of its seven steps labelled with one of the alchemical stages and governed by one of the planetary gods.<sup>297</sup>

Waite’s Theosophically inclined interpretation of alchemy divides the *opus* into seven stages of the soul’s ascent, culminating in a union with the Holy Spirit.<sup>298</sup> The Philosophers’ Stone, synonymous with alchemical gold, is the ‘greatest and most victorious of all lights’, identified with Christ as the Saviour and Preserver of the world.<sup>299</sup> Jung understands alchemy

<sup>292</sup> For three stages, see Eleazar, Abraham, *Uraltes Chymisches Werck* (Leipzig, 1760), in Jung, *CW14*, p. 451. For seven stages, see Albertus Magnus, *Libellus de Alchimia*, 30-36, trans. in Linden, pp. 106-109; Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things*, Book VII, trans. A. E. Waite, in Waite, A. E., ed., *The Hermetic and Alchemical Writings of Paracelsus* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003 [1910]), p. 151. For ten stages, see *Rosarium*, in Jung, *CW16*, pp. 203-320. For twenty-two stages, see Trismosin, *Splendor Solis*, in Wasserman, pp. 94-99.

<sup>293</sup> De Rola, p. 193.

<sup>294</sup> De Rola, p. 206.

<sup>295</sup> On correspondences as an intrinsic aspect of the Western esoteric tradition, see Faivre, Antoine, ‘Introduction I’ [hereafter Faivre, [Introduction I]] in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, pp. xv-xvi. On correspondences as an aspect of Renaissance magic, see Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ‘How magic survived the disenchantment of the world’, *Religion*, No. 33 (2003) [hereafter Hanegraaff, ‘How magic survived’], pp. 361-363 and 366-367. On the Stoic doctrine of correspondences or ‘sympathies’, see Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 106-113; Edelstein, Ludwig, ‘The Philosophical System of Posidonius’, *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1936), pp. 286-325.

<sup>296</sup> De Rola, p. 138. On the Tetragrammaton and its importance in the Kabbalah, see Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>297</sup> De Rola, p. 56.

<sup>298</sup> Waite, *Azoth*, pp. 167-68.

<sup>299</sup> Jung, *CW13*, para. 163.

to be a Gnosticised interpretation of normative Christian doctrine: the Saviour is the divine spirit, fallen ‘from the highest place into the darkest depths of matter’ where he awaits deliverance.<sup>300</sup> The alchemist, through combined chemical and contemplative practices which might be understood as a form of theurgy, performs that deliverance.<sup>301</sup> The idea of the ‘fallen’ state of Nature, and its unity with both the human soul and the imprisoned Redeemer waiting for his own redemption, transform the celestial ascent into a mystical union of the soul of the alchemist with both Christ and Nature: a ‘sacred marriage’ that unites above and below, and relies for its consummation on the power of the imagination, ‘alone capable of “informing” and animating matter’.<sup>302</sup>

### 5.3: Paracelsus and the ‘shining body’

In spiritual alchemy, the imagination is related to the ‘subtle body’.<sup>303</sup> The *ochêma* found its way first into the astrological-medical theories of late antiquity and the Renaissance. Galen, in the second century CE, calls the *ochêma* a ‘shining and aethereal body’ through which the soul receives communion with the celestial bodies.<sup>304</sup> In the mid-sixteenth century, the French physician Fernel informs us that the soul, before its ‘immigration’ into the physical body, clothes itself in ‘a simple garment, a certain shining, pure body like a star’.<sup>305</sup> It is through this ‘shining body’, and its mediation between the human *intellectus* and the celestial realms from which the soul has descended, that the spiritual ascent of alchemy is made possible. Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) states that, when the human mind is focused with

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<sup>300</sup> Jung, *CW13*, para. 183. See also Dillon, John, ‘The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Thought’, in Dillon, *The Golden Chain*, Sec. XII, pp. 357-364. See also a 2nd century CE Gnostic account of the descent of Christ in Newbold, ‘Descent of Christ’, pp. 168-210.

<sup>301</sup> See Quispel, Gilles, ‘Gnosis and Alchemy: The Tabula Smaragdina’, in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme*, p. 333.

<sup>302</sup> Bonardel, p. 76.

<sup>303</sup> On the ‘subtle body’ and its relationship with the transformations of matter, see Corbin, ‘*Mundus Imaginalis*’, pp. 79-80.

<sup>304</sup> Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, VII, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Kühn, V.643, in Walker, D. P., ‘The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2 (January-June 1958) [hereafter Walker, ‘Astral Body’], p. 123.

<sup>305</sup> Fernel, Jean, *De Naturali Parte Medicinæ*, Book IV (Paris: André Wechel, 1554), p. 104, in Walker, ‘Astral Body’, p. 119.

great passion and intensity, it is ‘joined with the mind of the stars and intelligences’.<sup>306</sup> The sixteenth century alchemist Martin Ruland equates the ‘shining body’ with the imagination, which he calls ‘the star in man, the celestial or supercelestial body’.<sup>307</sup> The identity between the divine substance of the stars, the World Soul, and the ‘shining body’ permits the redemption of Nature which is the goal of the alchemical *opus*. The imaginative faculty as mediator of celestial divinity is described most clearly by Agrippa’s contemporary, the physician Theophrastus von Hohenheim (1493-1541), later known as Paracelsus. In Paracelsus’ work, a new, dynamic interaction emerges between the idea of the celestial ascent and early modern science. Paracelsus attributes to the ‘shining body’ not only the capacity to understand and participate in the unity of the cosmos, but also the generation of diseases and cures.<sup>308</sup> The *lumen naturae* or ‘invisible body of nature’ is a source of divine revelation as valid as that of scripture, and more accessible because it dwells ‘in our hearts’.<sup>309</sup>

Paracelsian alchemy relates the soul’s ascent to the process of healing. This ‘medical alchemy’ strongly resembles what many contemporary spiritualities understand as ‘holistic medicine’.<sup>310</sup> Through harmonising the ‘shining body’ with the *lumen naturae*, healing is accomplished; but at death, the *ochêma* gradually dissolves, while the immortal soul, which is made in the image of God, ‘returns to Him whose image it is’.<sup>311</sup> Schipperges argues that Paracelsian texts that focus on earthly and sidereal vehicles, and promulgate an alchemical *opus* that ultimately seeks to liberate the soul from the corporeal body, are written, not by the

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<sup>306</sup> Agrippa, Henry Cornelius, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, trans. James Freake, ed. Donald Tyson (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 2004), p. 208.

<sup>307</sup> Ruland, Martin, *A Lexicon of Alchemy or Alchemical Dictionary* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984 [1893]), p. 182.

<sup>308</sup> Paracelsus, *Sämtliche Werke: 1. Abt. Medizinische, naturwissenschaftliche und philosophische Schriften*, VIII, 161-170, ed. Karl Sudhoff, 14 volumes (Munich and Berlin, 1922-1933), in Schipperges, Heinrich, ‘Paracelsus and His Followers’, trans. John Bowden [hereafter Schipperges], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 158.

<sup>309</sup> Paracelsus, *Caput de morbis somnii*, IX; Paracelsus, *Astronomia magna*, XII, both in Jung, *CW13*, para. 148.

<sup>310</sup> See the description of ‘New Age’ healing in Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 42-61.

<sup>311</sup> Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, II.I.115, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York, NY: Bollingen Series Vol. XXVII, Pantheon, 1958) [hereafter Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*], p. 217.

great physician himself, but by his followers.<sup>312</sup> Despite this apparent effort to strip Paracelsus of his dualism, Schipperges concedes that Paracelsus is neither a prototype of the ‘new science’ nor a mouthpiece for authoritative medieval doctrines.<sup>313</sup> It is possible that Paracelsus was one of those comprehensive thinkers who, like Plato, could move freely between mythic and conceptual modes of thought, incorporating Hermetic magic, Hellenic cosmology, Kabbalistic mystical speculation, and scientific rationalism in a unitive vision of the celestial ascent of the soul.

#### 5.4: The ascent of Christian Rosenkreutz

The Paracelsian synthesis left its mark on those subsequent currents now understood as the substance of modern Western esotericism, including Rosicrucianism.<sup>314</sup> The three foundational writings of the fictional ‘Order of the Rose Cross’ – *Fama Fraternitas*, *Confessio Fraternitatis*, and *Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz (The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz)* – were all written by Johann Valentin Andreae (1586-1654), a Lutheran pastor, and published in the second decade of the seventeenth century.<sup>315</sup> These works, partly inspired by a politico-religious current aimed at a new Reformation in German Lutheranism, present the celestial ascent as an inner journey combining spiritual alchemy with Christian mysticism, early modern science, and a particular view of Nature referred to by Robert Fludd as ‘pansophia’ and later known as *Naturphilosophie*.<sup>316</sup> The

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<sup>312</sup> Schipperges, p. 174.

<sup>313</sup> Schipperges, p. 179.

<sup>314</sup> For a comprehensive overview of these currents in Western esotericism, see Faivre, ‘Introduction I’, pp. xi-xxii; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 384-410.

<sup>315</sup> On the politico-religious currents involved in the ‘Rosicrucian manifestos’, see Edighoffer, Roland, ‘Hermeticism in Early Rosicrucianism’ [hereafter Edighoffer, ‘Hermeticism in Early Rosicrucianism’], in *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, p. 197. For a discussion of Andreae’s authorship of the manifestos, see Dickson, Donald R., ‘Johann Valentin Andreae’s Utopian Brotherhoods’, *The Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter 1996) [hereafter Dickson], pp. 760-802.

<sup>316</sup> Edighoffer, ‘Hermeticism in Early Rosicrucianism’, p. 198. On *Naturphilosophie* and its adherents, see Faivre, Antoine, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 116-136; Faivre, Antoine, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) [hereafter Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*], pp. 82-85; Von Engelhardt, Dietrich, ‘Natural Science in the Age of Romanticism’, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, pp. 101-131; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 64-67;

World Soul or ‘Light of Nature’ is perceived in the web of correspondences woven throughout the natural world as well as the heavens, providing the theoretical basis of alchemy as a ‘spiritual science’.<sup>317</sup> Versluis suggests that the Christian theosophy of Jacob Böhme (1575-1624) and his followers is rooted in the same Paracelsian alchemical tradition that inspired Andraea’s ‘Rosicrucian manifestos’.<sup>318</sup> In the theosophical alchemy of John Pordage (1608-1681), the soul is purified through the seven stages of an inner ascent, resulting, like the initiation ritual of the *Poimandres*, in the spiritual transformation of the adept: ‘And now is the holy man in his own nature become one with God’.<sup>319</sup>

*The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* is a revelatory drama in seven chapters, whose action, always moving upward, takes place in seven days. Edighoffer suggests that *The Chymical Wedding* belongs to the tradition of apocalyptic literature.<sup>320</sup> A humble ascetic called Christian Rosenkreutz is summoned by an angel to the wedding of the King. In response to his question of whether he is worthy to attend, he is visited by a dream in which, like the Gnostic soul imprisoned in matter, he is confined with others in a deep well, ‘fettered with great chains in a dark dungeon, wherein without the least glimpse of light, we swarmed like bees one over another, and thus rendered each others affliction more grievous’.<sup>321</sup> A rope is thrown down to the suffering souls seven times and, on the last throw, Christian manages to grasp it and pull himself out. His journey culminates in the ascent of a

Deghaye, Pierre, ‘Jacob Boehme and His Followers’, trans. Katherine O’Brien and Stephen Voss, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, pp. 214-216; Williams-Hogan, Jane, ‘The Place of Emanuel Swedenborg in Modern Western Esotericism’, in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 240-241; Bonardel, pp. 79-80; Debus, Allen G., *The English Paracelsians* (New York, NY: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1966), pp. 86-136, Tamas, Richard, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 1991), p. 378.

<sup>317</sup> For the use of the term ‘spiritual science’ in Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and contemporary spiritualities, see, for example, Bailey, Alice A., *From Intellect to Intuition* (London: Lucis Press, 1960), pp. 16-17; Steiner, Rudolf, *The Philosophy of Freedom: The basis for a modern world conception*, trans. Michael Wilson (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1972 [1894]) [hereafter Steiner, *Philosophy of Freedom*], p. xxii-xxx; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 62-76.

<sup>318</sup> Versluis, Arthur, ‘Alchemy and Christian Theosophic Literature’ [hereafter Versluis], in *Western Esotericism*, p. 131.

<sup>319</sup> Pordage, John, *A Philosophic Epistle* (c. 1670), in Versluis, p. 139.

<sup>320</sup> Edighoffer, Roland, ‘Rosicrucianism: From the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century’, trans. Stephen Voss [hereafter Edighoffer, Rosicrucianism’], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 188.

<sup>321</sup> Andraea, Johann Valentin, *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, trans. Edward Foxcroft (London: Minerva Books, 1976 [1690]) [hereafter Andraea, *Chymical Wedding*], p. 5.

high mountain, where the royal castle, resembling the seventh *hekala* of the *merkabah* mystics or Teresa of Avila's celestial edifice, rises into the air. Arriving at sunset, the moment of death prior to resurrection, Christian passes through three portals, at each of which an angelic gatekeeper demands to see his invitation, and where he is given new garments as well as being tested for spiritual purity. There is a further spiritual ascent symbolised by a staircase of three hundred and sixty-five steps, corresponding to one solar revolution through the zodiac. The *unio mystica* occurs on the eighth floor of the castle, which, like the Hermetic Ogdoad, is the realm of the divine constellations, beyond the reach of planetary fate.

Andreae himself later referred to the 'Rosicrucian manifestos' as a *ludibrium*: a despicable jest or prank.<sup>322</sup> But the imaginary 'Order of the Rose Cross' caused a furor which had profound and lasting consequences in the development of Western religious thought.<sup>323</sup> The manifestos were understood by admirers to be the work of an actual secret society, and consequently inspired the development of alchemical currents in Freemasonry as well as the many associated initiatic and magical orders that, from the seventeenth century to the present, incorporate a structure and content based on alchemical imagery, Christian and Kabbalistic theosophy, and Masonic ritual grades.<sup>324</sup> The term 'Rosicrucian-Christian tradition' has come

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<sup>322</sup> Dickson, p. 787.

<sup>323</sup> On the political consequences and the contribution of the Rosicrucian furor to the Thirty Years War, see Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, pp. 35-36, 51-53. For an overview of the political and religious sources of the Thirty Years War, see Wedgwood, C. V., *The Thirty Years War* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005 [1967]); Parker, Geoffrey, *The Thirty Years War* (London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>324</sup> For Rosicrucian influences on nineteenth century Freemasonry, see Godwin, Joscelyn, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) [hereafter Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*], pp. 216-225. For a detailed examination of links between Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry in France, see Le Forestier, René, *La Franc-Maçonnerie Templière et Occultiste aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. Antoine Faivre (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1970). For the influence of the Masonic grade system on these organisations, see Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 52-61. See also the literature from contemporary groups associating themselves with Christian Rosenkreutz and the original Rosicrucian 'order': Lewis, H. Spencer, *Rosicrucian Questions and Answers with Complete Answers* (San Jose, CA: Supreme Grand Lodge of AMORC, 1969); Clymer, R. Swinburne, *The Rosy Cross, Its Teachings* (Quakertown, PA: Beverly Hall Corporation, 1965); Plummer, George Winslow, *Principles and Practice for Rosicrucians* (New York, NY: Society of Rosicrucians, 1947); Heindel, Max, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* (Oceanside, CA: Rosicrucian Fellowship, 1909). For an overview of Rosicrucianism in modern times, see McIntosh, Christopher, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order* (York Beach, ME: Weiserbooks, 1998). For a Theosophical interpretation, see Waite, A. E., *Real History of the Rosicrucians* (Blauvelt, NY: Steinerbooks, 1977 [1887]).

to imply a current in esoteric Christian thought which encompasses the idea of spiritual alchemy and theosophical gnosis.<sup>325</sup> One of the chief representatives of this current in the modern world is Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who seems to have taken Andreae's *ludibrium* literally and proclaims Christian Rosenkreutz as the leading modern Western spiritual 'Master'.<sup>326</sup> Steiner's Anthroposophical system, presented as a 'modern initiation science',<sup>327</sup> proposes a series of seven stages of alchemical ascent, equated, like Plato's 'ladder of Diotima' and Stephen bar Sudaile's 'Ascent of the Mind', with progressive mental states induced by the theurgic technique of meditative exercises resembling the Kabbalistic *kavvanah*.<sup>328</sup> Steiner's *nousanodia* begins with sensory perception, proceeds through feeling perception, conceptualisation, inductive inference, imagination, and inspiration, and culminates in intuitive gnosis: the union of the individual human soul with the Paracelsian *lumen naturae* or 'World-Spirit'.<sup>329</sup> The celestial ascent has travelled a long way from antiquity, yet its structure remains intact.

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<sup>325</sup> McDermott, Robert A., 'Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy' [hereafter McDermott, 'Steiner'], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 288.

<sup>326</sup> Steiner, Rudolf, 'On the history of Christian Rosenkreutz', in Allen, P. M., ed., *A Christian Rosenkreutz Anthology* (Blauvelt, NY: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1968) [hereafter *Rosenkreutz Anthology*], pp. 439-441. See also Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz', and 'Christian Rosenkreutz and the Temple legend', both in *Rosenkreutz Anthology*, pp. 19-59 and pp. 443-448.

<sup>327</sup> Wehr, Gerhard, *Jung and Steiner: The Birth of a New Psychology*, trans. Magdalene Jaekel (Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press, 2002), p. 187.

<sup>328</sup> For Steiner's alchemical ascent, see Steiner, Rudolf, *Alchemy: The Evolution of the Mysteries* (Herndon, VA: Anthroposophic Press, 2002 [1905-08]). On Steiner's meditative exercises, see Steiner, Rudolf, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment*, trans. George Metaxa (Blauvelt, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1947 [1904-5]).

<sup>329</sup> Steiner, Rudolf, *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Eleven European Mystics*, trans. Karl E. Zimmer (Blauvelt, NY: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1960 [1901]), p. 207; Steiner, Rudolf, *Rosicrucianism and Modern Initiation: Mystery Centres of the Middle Ages*, trans. Mary Adams (London: Rudolf Steiner, 1982 [1924]), pp. 29-34. For a full examination of the stages of knowledge, see Steiner, *Philosophy of Freedom*, pp. 3-89. See also McDermott, 'Steiner', pp. 306-7. For an introductory anthology of Steiner's work, see McDermott, Robert A., ed., *The Essential Steiner* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1984).

## Chapter Six: The ascent into the modern world

### 6.1: The celestial ascent in the ‘occult revival’

The nineteenth century term ‘occultism’ is usually credited to Éliphas Lévi (1810-1875), who defines it in his influential work, *Transcendental Magic*.<sup>330</sup> Lévi probably acquired the term from Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia*, in which it designates the three ‘traditional sciences’ of astrology, alchemy, and magic.<sup>331</sup> Agrippa’s Renaissance occult philosophy is defined by Faivre as a magical vision of the world in which everything acts upon everything else ‘analogically’.<sup>332</sup> Hanegraaff proposes that Lévi’s modern occultism is ‘new’ because of its uniquely modern blend of older world-views, based on universal analogies, and new scientific paradigms rooted in ‘instrumental causality’.<sup>333</sup> This ‘mixture of logically incompatible elements’ underpins the late nineteenth century ‘occult revival’ and generates many of the ideas later adopted by contemporary spiritualities.<sup>334</sup> One such idea is the spiritual ascent of the soul. But the ascent has combined these ‘logically incompatible elements’ of analogies and causality since antiquity, because it is so closely associated with the instrumental causality of theurgy.<sup>335</sup> In this respect, the ascent in contemporary spiritualities is not ‘new’ at all.

In the ‘occult revival’, the ascent provides not only a vision of the soul’s destiny, but also the initiatic structure of many modern occult organisations. The Hermetic Order of the

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<sup>330</sup> Lévi, Éliphas, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, trans. A. E. Waite (York Beach, ME: Weiserbooks, 2001 [1896]; first published as *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (Paris, 1856) [hereafter Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*], pp. 1-24.

<sup>331</sup> For Lévi’s specific reference to Agrippa’s *De occulta philosophia*, see Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 2.2, p. 215. See also Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pp. 34-35; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 384-85. On the three ‘traditional’ sciences, see Faivre, Antoine, ‘Questions of Terminology Proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe’, in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>332</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, p. 66.

<sup>333</sup> Hanegraaff, ‘How magic survived’, pp. 375-78.

<sup>334</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 406-7.

<sup>335</sup> See, for example, the ‘automatism of cause and effect’ in the *hekhlot* literature, in Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, pp. 165-66. For a discussion of the close relationship between magic and science, see Penner, Hans H., ‘Rationality, Ritual, and Science’, in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, pp. 11-24; Tambiah, pp. 65-74; Phillips, C. R. III, ‘Nullum Crimen sine Lege: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic’, in *Magika Hiera*, pp. 267-68.

Golden Dawn, created in 1887-88, appropriated its ideas, rituals, imagery, and magical practices from a wide range of sources, including Kabbalah, Renaissance Hermetism and Neoplatonism, Paracelsian alchemy and *Naturphilosophie*, the Rosicrucian manifestos, the theosophies of Böhme and Swedenborg, speculative Freemasonry, spiritualism, and the cosmology of the Theosophical Society founded a decade earlier.<sup>336</sup> The Golden Dawn offered ten grades of initiation, and appealed to esoterically minded Freemasons, esoterically minded women (who were barred from Masonic lodges), and disenchanted Theosophists who wanted more Christianity in their esotericism and preferred practical magic to mere philosophical speculation.<sup>337</sup> The initiations, based on a symbolic ascent of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, utilise as visualisation tools Rosicrucian, alchemical, and astrological imagery, and the Major Arcana of the Tarot.<sup>338</sup> These rituals, like medieval Kabbalistic theurgy, are intended to induce an ascent through higher realms, with a resulting psychological and spiritual transformation and empowerment.<sup>339</sup>

The nature, meaning, and variety of initiation rituals as a constant feature of human religious expression is beyond the scope of this paper, but the existing literature is immense, and encompasses anthropological, psychological, sociological, and historical perspectives,

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<sup>336</sup> Among the many scholarly works exploring the complex web of connections between these sources, see Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, pp. 205-225; Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 75-83; Garrett, Clarke, 'Swedenborg and the Mystical Enlightenment in Late Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1984), pp. 67-81; Eliade, Mircea, 'Occultism and Freemasonry in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *History of Religions*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Aug. 1973), pp. 89-91; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 87-88; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pp. xiv-xviii, 78-81; Snoek, Jan, 'On the Creation of Masonic Degrees: A Method and Its Fruits', in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 145-190; Laurant, Jean-Pierre, 'Esotericism in Freemasonry: The Example of François-Nicolas Noël's *Géométrie du Maçon*', in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 191-200; Trompf, Garry W., 'Macrohistory in Blavatsky, Steiner, and Guénon', in *Western Esotericism*, pp. 274-286; Sellon, Emily B. and Renée Weber, 'Theosophy and the Theosophical Society' [hereafter Sellon and Weber], in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, p. 311. For the Masonic and Rosicrucian proclivities of the Golden Dawn's founders, see Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, pp. 216-222; Howe, Ellic, *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn: A Documentary History of a Magical Order 1887-1923* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) [hereafter Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*], pp. 26-33; Gilbert, R. A., *Revelations of the Golden Dawn: The Rise and Fall of a Magical Order* (Slough: Foulsham & Co., 1997) [hereafter Gilbert, *Revelations of the Golden Dawn*], p. 5.

<sup>337</sup> On the conflicts between Eastern and Western traditions in the Theosophical Society, see Bevir, Mark, 'The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 747-767; Sellon and Weber, p. 316; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 452-55.

<sup>338</sup> For a detailed 'revelation' of these initiatic rituals, see Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, pp. 19-21, 113-247.

<sup>339</sup> See Regardie's introductions to the various editions in Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, pp. 1-48.

including functionalist, reductionist, substantive, and universalist approaches.<sup>340</sup> Rites of initiation are magical: they are intended to produce, as well as signify, an ontological change in the individual, even when the goal is not explicitly religious.<sup>341</sup> The word ‘initiation’ is derived from *initiatio*, the Latin translation of the Greek *mysteria*.<sup>342</sup> Mysteries, in turn, cannot be separated from magic: in the Greek magical papyri, ‘magic’ is simply called ‘mystery’ or ‘mystery of God’.<sup>343</sup> The celestial ascent of the soul in Western cultures is usually linked with both mysteries and magic: the Orphic gold *lamellae* testify to this, as do the Gnostic, Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and *merkabah* theurgic techniques of late antiquity, early Eastern Christian ascetic practices, the Kabbalistic *devekut*, and the alchemical ascents of the Renaissance and early modern period.<sup>344</sup> The celestial ascent tends to travel in company with the idea that living humans, purified and equipped with the necessary knowledge, do not have to wait for the divine to confer favours, but can encourage if not actually compel the heavens to open for the ascending soul.<sup>345</sup>

The Golden Dawn initiations may be understood as both an interiorisation and a ceremonial enactment of the stages of the celestial ascent. Magical intentions are demonstrated in both the wording and the colours of the emblems, objects, and clothing used by the participants.<sup>346</sup> This symbolic use of colour is also characteristic of Masonic ritual,

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<sup>340</sup> For an analysis of different scholarly approaches to initiation ceremonies, see Weckman, George, ‘Understanding Initiation’, *History of Religions*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Aug. 1970) [hereafter Weckman, ‘Understanding Initiation’], pp. 62-79. For a useful overview and bibliography on the subject, see Braun, Willi and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 2006).

<sup>341</sup> On the ‘sociogenic’ interpretation of initiation ceremonies, see Weckford, ‘Understanding Initiation’, pp. 64-69. On ancient Greek initiations which apparently serve social and educational rather than overtly religious goals, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 260-64.

<sup>342</sup> Burkert, Walter, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>343</sup> Betz, Hans Dieter, ‘Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri’, in *Magika Hiera*, p. 249.

<sup>344</sup> On the interchangeability of ‘magic’ and ‘theurgy’, see Schäfer, Peter, ‘Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism’ [hereafter Schäfer, ‘Magic and Religion’], in Schäfer, Peter and Hans G. Kippenberg, eds., *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden: Brill, 1997) [hereafter *Envisioning Magic*], p. 25.

<sup>345</sup> See the discussion of the human intent to ‘storm’ heaven through magical practices in Schäfer, *Hidden and Manifest God*, pp. 161-66; Johnston, Sarah Iles, ‘Rising to the Occasion: Theurgic Ascent in Its Cultural Milieu’, in *Envisioning Magic*, pp. 174-176.

<sup>346</sup> See, for example, Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, pp. 117, 198-99; Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, p. 107.

which, in more esoterically inclined lodges, utilises the colours of the alchemical stages.<sup>347</sup> The employment of colours linking the stages of alchemical transmutation to the stages of the soul's ascent is evident in *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*.<sup>348</sup> In the Golden Dawn initiations, colours, sacred objects, ritualised movement, and chanting meld together to facilitate the transformation of the initiate. There is nothing new or innovative about this kind of theurgy. While modern occult practices may be secularised in terms of the psychological or mechanistic language used to explain them to the outsider, and even to the participant, the idea of grades of initiation, embodying the structure of the celestial ascent in symbolic forms, has remained consistent from antiquity to the present day. Regardie informs us that the object of the Golden Dawn's initiations, which he calls 'the Theurgic art', is 'spiritual growth.'<sup>349</sup> The language is modern, but it would seem that the idea is not.

## 6.2: The *ochêmata* in modern Theosophy

Riffard comments that the point of departure for an esotericist is the 'fundamental unity of religions'.<sup>350</sup> This certainly applies to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), whose Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, is dedicated to 'preserving and realizing the ageless wisdom'.<sup>351</sup> The celestial ascent of the soul as a map of spiritual evolution, both human and cosmic, is central to this 'ageless wisdom'. After death, the soul sheds its temporary 'bodies' in its progress toward its divine source.<sup>352</sup> The Theosophical *ochêmata* are also related to specific planes of consciousness, reflected in the seven levels through which the living adept

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<sup>347</sup> On the use of alchemical colours in initiatic orders, see Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, pp. 182-85; Faivre, Antoine, *The Golden Fleece and Alchemy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>348</sup> See, for example, Andraea, *Chymical Wedding*, pp. 9, 43, 52.

<sup>349</sup> Regardie, *Golden Dawn*, p. 23.

<sup>350</sup> Riffard, p. 72.

<sup>351</sup> Sellon and Weber, p. 328.

<sup>352</sup> See Blavatsky, H. P., 'Astral Bodies, or Doppelgänger' [hereafter Blavatsky, 'Astral Bodies'], in Blavatsky, H. P., *Studies in Occultism* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1998 [1887-1891]), pp. 185-87.

ascends to achieve spiritual enlightenment.<sup>353</sup> Merkur suggests that the Theosophical planes exist in, or are part of, an Otherworld that, like the planetary spheres of the *Poimandres*, is both objective and subjective: a *mundus imaginalis* rather than merely a projection of the individual psyche.<sup>354</sup> Besant refers to the *ochêmata* as ‘casings’, each one enabling the soul to function in ‘some definite region of the universe’.<sup>355</sup> ‘Casing’ and ‘region’ are comprised of the same substance, which Leadbeater describes as ‘finer states of matter’.<sup>356</sup> The term ‘astral body’, Leadbeater informs us, signifies ‘starry’, and describes the substance of the plane immediately above the physical ‘because of the luminous appearance which is associated with the more rapid rate of its vibration’.<sup>357</sup>

Descending from its divine source, the immortal soul acquires a ‘spiritual ego’, which remains permanent as long as the soul requires repeated embodiments.<sup>358</sup> The spiritual ego then clothes itself with a causal body, ‘in which all the man’s treasures are stored for eternity’.<sup>359</sup> The causal body, a kind of memory bank that records the ‘good deeds’ performed in various incarnations, is likewise retained through the entire incarnation cycle. The mental and astral bodies are temporary, having been created specifically for each rebirth. In the mental body, the soul ‘manifests as mind’. The astral body, in contrast, is the seat of all ‘animal passions and desires’, like the Neoplatonic ‘lower’ soul that acquires various planetary influences during its descent and, unlike the ‘rational’ soul, is subject to astrological fate.<sup>360</sup> Finally, the physical vehicle is divided into a ‘dense body’ and an ‘etheric double’, the

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<sup>353</sup> Blavatsky, H. P., ‘The Trial of the Sun Initiate’, in Blavatsky, H. P., *Collected Writings*, Vol. 14 (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985) [hereafter Blavatsky, CW14], pp. 261-65.

<sup>354</sup> Merkur, ‘Otherworld’, pp. 90-92. Also see Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>355</sup> Besant, Annie, *Man and His Bodies* (Los Angeles, CA: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917) [hereafter Besant], p. 7.

<sup>356</sup> Leadbeater, p. 16.

<sup>357</sup> Leadbeater, p. 18.

<sup>358</sup> Besant, p. 80.

<sup>359</sup> Besant, p. 73.

<sup>360</sup> Besant, p. 63 and p. 42; Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 375-77.

latter being an exact replica of the visible body and the ‘medium through which play all the electrical and vital currents on which the activity of the body depends’.<sup>361</sup>

The enduring fascination with the idea of the independent soul, clothed in its *ochêmata* and ascending through a series of inner spiritual planes, has moved beyond Theosophy into many contemporary spiritualities. These *ochêmata* exist as objective realities, yet they are also subjective; they are made of ‘substance’, yet they are incorporeal; they are ‘places’ in the cosmos, yet they do not exist in the physical universe; and they are psychological ‘projections’ capable of affecting both external and internal reality. Jung proposes the term ‘psychoid’ to describe experiences that are simultaneously external and internal, real and imaginal.<sup>362</sup> Archetypal patterns are characteristically ‘psychoid’ because they are experienced on both levels at once. Contemporary occultists may use scientific language to justify their practices in a world dominated by the ‘ideology of instrumental causality’, but what they experience may be quite different.<sup>363</sup> Jung’s concept may be more relevant in understanding the experiences underlying the Theosophical ascent than the modern language in which these perceptions are often clothed.

### 6.3: The celestial ascent as a form of hermeneutics

In contemporary spiritualities, the celestial ascent may appear as a form of hermeneutics, clearly demonstrated by modern interpretations of the Tarot cards. The earliest known Tarot deck appears in fifteenth century Italy, with its structure already established: twenty-two Major Arcana or ‘Greater Trumps’ and fifty-six Minor Arcana or ‘suit’ cards, the latter forming the basis for modern playing cards. There has been little scholarly research into the

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<sup>361</sup> Besant, pp. 9-10.

<sup>362</sup> Jung, *CW8*, paras. 840, 962.

<sup>363</sup> Hanegraaff, ‘How magic survived’, p. 378.

Tarot's origins and relationship to Western esoteric traditions, largely because it is usually perceived as a method of divination adopted by contemporary occultists and neopagans.<sup>364</sup> Moreover, the trail of the cards fades away before the fifteenth century, leaving room only for speculation about their antecedents.<sup>365</sup> Before the late eighteenth century, the cards seem to have eked out an impoverished existence as gypsy fortune-telling cards. In 1781, Antoine Court de Gébelin (1725-1784), a French-Swiss pastor and Freemason, published the startling declaration that the gypsy Tarot was all that remained of an ancient Egyptian book of magical wisdom preserved by the Romany people since their exodus from Egypt, and that the twenty-two Major Arcana of the Tarot are related to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.<sup>366</sup> Once these theories were made public, followed in the mid-nineteenth century by Lévi's statement that the Tarot is the 'key of all doctrines and all philosophies of the old world',<sup>367</sup> the future of the cards in contemporary Western spiritualities was assured.

The Order of the Golden Dawn appropriated Lévi's coupling of the Tarot with the Kabbalah as a basis for its rituals.<sup>368</sup> In 1910, Waite designed a new Tarot deck, reflecting his Theosophical and Rosicrucian predilections; the images of the cards are dominated by symbols such as the rose and the cross.<sup>369</sup> Waite accepts Lévi's assertion that the Tarot symbolises the soul's ascent, but rejects the idea that the cards portray the journey through

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<sup>364</sup> For this perspective on the Tarot, see Luhrmann, T. M., *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 151-58; Greenwood, Susan, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 51-60. For a well reasoned 'emic' exploration of the origins of the cards, see Huson, Paul, *The Devil's Picture Book* (London: Abacus, 1972) [hereafter Huson, *Devil's Picture Book*]; Huson, Paul, *Mystical Origins of the Tarot: From Ancient Roots to Modern Usage* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2004) [hereafter Huson, *Mystical Origins*]. For more scholarly analyses, see Wood, Juliette, 'The Celtic Tarot and the Secret Tradition: A Study in Modern Legend Making', *Folklore*, Vol. 109 (1998) [hereafter Wood, [Celtic Tarot]], pp. 15-24; Dummett, Michael, *The Game of Tarot* (London: Duckworth, 1980); Dummett, Michael, *A Wicked Pack of Cards* (London: Duckworth, 1996).

<sup>365</sup> For an example of scholarly speculation on the Tarot's origins in Gnostic dualism, see Runciman, Steven, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [1947]), pp. 179, 187.

<sup>366</sup> Court de Gébelin, Antoine, *Le monde primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne*, 9 volumes (Paris, 1781), VIII.1.1-2 and 1.4.8, at <http://www.tarock.info.gebelin.htm>.

<sup>367</sup> Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 2.22, p. 382. For an extensive bibliography of late eighteenth to early twentieth century works on Tarot, see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/tarot/pkt/pktbib.htm>.

<sup>368</sup> Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 1.10, pp. 100-103.

<sup>369</sup> See the images in Waite, A. E., *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (London: Rider, 1972 [1910]) [hereafter Waite, *Tarot*].

the sefirotic paths of the Tree of Life. Instead, Waite suggests that, if there is any secret doctrine contained in the Tarot, it lies in the universal ideas expressed in the images, comprising ‘a spiritual history of man, or of the soul coming out from the Eternal, passing into the darkness of the material body, and returning to the height’.<sup>370</sup> Waite’s deck was followed by a more controversial deck from Aleister Crowley, displaying Egyptian, alchemical, and astrological motifs.<sup>371</sup> Crowley endorses Lévi’s interpretation, declaring that the Tarot ‘is beyond doubt a deliberate attempt to represent, in pictorial form, the doctrines of the Qabalah’.<sup>372</sup> From the 1980s onward, a large number of new decks have appeared, based, like Waite’s and Crowley’s, on the traditional structure, but incorporating many dimensions of contemporary spiritual concerns, with titles such as ‘Dreampower Tarot’, ‘Druid Craft Tarot’, and ‘World Spirit Tarot’.<sup>373</sup> Like the celestial ascent, the Tarot has a capacity to lend itself to extensive creative reinterpretation while retaining a surprising degree of structural consistency.

The majority of contemporary exegeses of the Tarot are ‘manuals’ describing the divinatory meanings of the cards.<sup>374</sup> When a conceptual overview is offered, it is usually based on the idea of correspondences, and sometimes includes Jungian psychological models.<sup>375</sup> From an empirical perspective, the Tarot as a carrier of ancient wisdom is a modern cultural construct. There are no extant texts to confirm the meaning of the earliest Tarot decks, although Renaissance preoccupation with symbolic systems and theurgic

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<sup>370</sup> Waite, *Tarot*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>371</sup> See the images in Crowley, Aleister, *The Book of Thoth: The Egyptian Tarot by the Master Therion* (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2000 [1944]) [hereafter Crowley, *Book of Thoth*].

<sup>372</sup> Crowley, *Book of Thoth*, p. 10.

<sup>373</sup> For a comprehensive list and visual presentation of many hundreds of new and old Tarot decks, see [www.aeclectic.net/tarot](http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot).

<sup>374</sup> See, for example, Riley, Jana, *Tarot: Dictionary and Compendium* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1995); Shephard, John, *The Tarot Trumps: Cosmos in Miniature* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985); Walker, Barbara G., *The Secrets of the Tarot: Origins, History, and Symbolism* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1984); Blakeley, John D., *The Mystical Tower of the Tarot* (London: Watkins, 1974).

<sup>375</sup> On a Jungian interpretation of the cards, see Nichols, Sallie, *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey* (New York, NY: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1980). On a new deck of cards designed according to Jung’s ideas, see Wang, Robert, *The Jungian Tarot Deck* (Columbia, MD: Marcus Aurelius Press, 2001). Also see Campbell, Joseph and Richard Roberts, *Tarot Revelations* (San Anselmo, CA: Vernal Equinox Press, 1979) [hereafter Campbell and Roberts, *Tarot Revelations*].

practices makes it likely that Hermetic and Kabbalistic ideas lie behind the Tarot's imagery.<sup>376</sup> However, contemporary practitioners have no hesitation in relating the cards to the soul's ascent. Roberts, for example, states that the Tarot is 'an alchemical revelation' that follows the 'Stairway of Planets'; this is 'the path of the descending and ascending soul of man'.<sup>377</sup> The celestial ascent has transformed into a type of hermeneutics through which the images of the Tarot are understood, revealing them as carriers of profound truths about the journey of the human soul. Systems of thought which support the idea of the soul's ascent, such as Kabbalah or Hermetism, may then be cited as the 'origin' of the cards, providing verification of the truth of the interpretations.

Although this circular logic provides a prime example of the 'esoteric method' described by Riffard, the interpretation of myths, texts, and religious images as carriers of coded secrets is an ancient practice.<sup>378</sup> Using a religious idea as a form of hermeneutics is not unique to contemporary Western spiritualities. Texts and images are seen as sources of hidden meanings that, when scrutinised, will yield up profound wisdom about the basic truths of the cosmos and the place of humans and gods within it.<sup>379</sup> Dan defines a symbol as 'the maximum linguistic approximation' to something permanently beyond full expression in language.<sup>380</sup> Symbols are also magical: although they express only a small part of the meaning of the power they symbolise, they manifest 'a real and essential connection to that power'.<sup>381</sup> Gombrich observes that a symbol and its content are interchangeable: symbols

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<sup>376</sup> Wood, 'Celtic Tarot', p. 20.

<sup>377</sup> Campbell and Roberts, *Tarot Revelations*, p. 41.

<sup>378</sup> On the use of symbolic interpretation in the Greek world, see Tate, J., 'On the History of Allegorism', *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 1934), pp. 105-114; Struck, Peter T., 'Divination and Literary Criticism?' [hereafter Struck, 'Divination'], in Johnston, Sarah Iles and Peter T. Struck, eds., *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 149. On Renaissance symbolic interpretation, see Gombrich, E. H., 'Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neo-Platonic Thought', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 11 (1948) [hereafter Gombrich, 'Icones Symbolicae']. On Kabbalistic hermeneutics, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 200-249.

<sup>379</sup> Struck, 'Divination', pp. 154-55.

<sup>380</sup> Dan, Joseph, 'Gershom Scholem's Reconstruction of Early Kabbalah', *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (February 1985), pp. 46.

<sup>381</sup> Dan, 'Early Kabbalah', pp. 49-50.

unite ‘mystic significance and magic effect’.<sup>382</sup> It is on this basis that the Tarot was utilised in the Golden Dawn’s magical rituals. Applying the celestial ascent to the cards as a form of hermeneutics produces the very thing it claims to discover in them: revelations about individual and cosmic transformation.<sup>383</sup>

#### 6.4: Deepak Chopra and the seven ‘God responses’

Hanegraaff suggests that, in contemporary spiritualities, the divine can be accessed through an individual spiritual journey explicable in modern psychological language. This ‘radical religious individualism’ represents ‘an unprecedented break with religion as we know it from the past and the present’.<sup>384</sup> However, in many of the examples from antiquity discussed above, the idea of the celestial ascent is presented with a similar individualism and blurring of the boundaries between objective metaphysical reality and subjective inner experience. The language of contemporary ascents is certainly ‘new’ in that it incorporates modern psychological terminology and scientific theories adopted from such diverse sources as quantum physics and the older models of Mesmer and Swedenborg.<sup>385</sup> Zaleski notes that many modern visionaries, like their medieval counterparts, find that they are clothed in an *ochêma*, but contemporary accounts tend to utilise ‘quasi-scientific’ vocabulary borrowed from electricity and magnetism.<sup>386</sup> But the ascent of the *Poimandres*, like modern ‘New Age’ literature, speaks of the heavenly spheres as ‘energies’, an idea derived from Stoic physics, and Hai Gaon, in the eleventh century, gives what appears to be a recognisably psychological

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<sup>382</sup> Gombrich, ‘*Icones Symbolicae*’, p. 175.

<sup>383</sup> For a twentieth century example of this application in fiction, see Williams, Charles, *The Greater Trumps* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1932). For an example reflecting Anthroposophical views, see Tomberg, Valentin, *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey Into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2002 [1985]; originally *Méditations sur les 22 Arcanes Majeurs du Tarot* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1980). For an analysis of Tomberg’s work, see Faivre, Antoine, ‘Analysis of the Meditations of Valentin Tomberg on the Twenty-Two Major Arcana of the Tarot of Marseilles’, in Faivre, *Theosophy*, pp. 191-228.

<sup>384</sup> Hanegraaff, Wouter J., ‘New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian’s Perspective’, *Social Compass*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1999), p. 146.

<sup>385</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 62; Zaleski, p. 117.

<sup>386</sup> Zaleski, pp. 116-17.

interpretation of the *merkabah* ascent.<sup>387</sup> The amalgamation of the ascent with the scientific paradigms of its cultural milieu cannot be seen as ‘new’, except in the language of each specific paradigm.

Healing within contemporary spiritualities is inclined to be holistic, blending Eastern and Western religious traditions and focused on the element of ‘personal growth’.<sup>388</sup> This blend of religious and therapeutic elements is also found in both Paracelsian ‘medical alchemy’ and ancient Greek medicine.<sup>389</sup> It is currently exemplified in the highly popular work of Deepak Chopra, whose California-based Chopra Center is based upon ‘the principles and practices of holistic and alternative medicine from around the world’, and is intended to enhance physical, emotional, and spiritual ‘well-being’.<sup>390</sup> Chopra’s approach incorporates the celestial ascent as a form of hermeneutics describing levels and types of religious experience, and his seven-stage spiritual journey occupies a subjective ‘transition zone’ between the godhead and the material world.<sup>391</sup> These inner celestial spheres can only be apprehended physiologically: God’s presence becomes real only if it is translated into a ‘response of the brain’, called the ‘God response’.<sup>392</sup> Chopra’s celestial ascent thus amalgamates with cognitivism, a coupling characteristic of the appropriation of scientific

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<sup>387</sup> For ‘energies’ in the *Poimandres*, see CH I.24, in *Hermetica*, p. 6. On the Stoic idea of the cosmos as a unified field of constantly mingling and separating energies, see Long and Sedley, pp. 280-294; Sandbach, pp. 75-79. On Hai Gaon’s interpretation, see Wolfson, *Speculum*, pp. 110, 144-48. On the modern use of the term ‘energies’ to describe the seven spiritual ‘planes’, see Albanese, ‘Subtle Energies’, p. 313. For an example of new astronomical discoveries transforming celestial imagery in antiquity, see Hodges, Horace Jeffery, ‘Gnostic Liberation from Astrological Determinism: Hipparchan “Trepidation” and the Breaking of Fate’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Nov. 1997), pp. 359-373. On the incorporation of astronomical theories in Jewish apocalypses, see A. Collins, ‘Seven Heavens’, pp. 73-74.

<sup>388</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 46. Also see Albanese, Catherine, ‘The Aura of Wellness: Subtle-Energy Healing and New Age Religion’, *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 29-55.

<sup>389</sup> On Paracelsus, see Schipperges, p. 162. On the relationship between religion, magic, and medicine in ancient Greece, see Edelstein, Ludwig, *Ancient Medicine*, trans. C. Lilian Temkin (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987 [1967]), pp. 205-246. See also Edelstein, Emma J. and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998 [1945]). On the relationship between religion, magic, and healing in ancient Judaism, see Schäfer, ‘Magic and Religion’, pp. 34-35.

<sup>390</sup> <<http://www.chopra.com>>.

<sup>391</sup> Chopra, Deepak, *How to Know God: The Soul’s Journey Into the Mystery of Mysteries* (London: Rider, 2000) [hereafter Chopra], pp. 4-6.

<sup>392</sup> Chopra, p. 6.

language evidenced in many contemporary belief-systems.<sup>393</sup>

Chopra asserts that ‘seven definite events taking place inside the brain’ reflect seven different experiences of the godhead.<sup>394</sup> These ‘events’ reflect an inner ascent from the most basic, visceral level to the most spiritually sophisticated, and are also typological: ‘The brain cannot register a deity outside the seven responses’.<sup>395</sup> Chopra also utilises Jungian models: God is perceived in these ways because ‘the human situation is always being projected onto God, only to come back as spiritual truth’.<sup>396</sup> That Chopra is familiar with astrology is clear from his web site, which offers a service of traditional Jyotish (Vedic) astrological counselling.<sup>397</sup> The seven ‘God responses’ suggest Jyotish as well as Hellenic planetary symbolism, although the order of the planets, like that of the Mithraic grades, does not follow the traditional Chaldean hierarchy. For example, in the second ‘event’, good is defined as ‘getting what you want’, and the world exists to be explored and conquered because the Almighty approves of accomplishment.<sup>398</sup> The planet Mars in Vedic astrology represents prowess, courage, valour, strength, and physical stamina, and the capacity to achieve ‘whatever goals he is set’.<sup>399</sup> Chopra’s second ‘event’ is distinctly Martial, echoing both Macrobius’ description of the soul’s acquisition of *thymikon* (a ‘bold spirit’) as it descends through Mars’ sphere,<sup>400</sup> and the ‘unholy presumption and daring recklessness’ described in

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<sup>393</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 62.

<sup>394</sup> Chopra, pp. 6-7.

<sup>395</sup> Chopra, p. 9.

<sup>396</sup> Chopra, p. 71. On a definition of projection in analytical psychology, see Jung, *CW10*, para. 361. See also Von Franz, Marie-Louise, *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology: Reflections of the Soul*, trans. William H. Kennedy (London: Open Court, 1980).

<sup>397</sup> <http://www.chopra.com/article114.aspx>. On Jyotish astrology, see Sutton, Komilla, *The Essentials of Vedic Astrology* (Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 1999) [hereafter Sutton, *Vedic Astrology*].

<sup>398</sup> Chopra, pp. 71-74.

<sup>399</sup> Sutton, *Vedic Astrology*, p. 39. For a Hellenistic interpretation of Mars, see Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, I.4. For a Renaissance interpretation of Mars in the work of Marsilio Ficino, see Moore, Thomas, *The Planets Within: The Astrological Psychology of Marsilio Ficino* (Great Barrington, ME: Lindisfarne Press, 1990), pp. 183-189. For a modern Western astrological interpretation of Mars, see Sasportas, Howard, *The Twelve Houses* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1985), pp. 212-226. For a Theosophical interpretation of Mars, see Leo, Alan, *How to Judge a Nativity* (Edinburgh: International Publishing Co., 1965 [1909]), pp. 30-32.

<sup>400</sup> Macrobius, XII.13.

the ascent of the *Poimandres*.<sup>401</sup> The soul's ascent through the planetary spheres, interacting with analytical and cognitive psychological models, forms the underlying structure as well as the hermeneutics of this distinctive contemporary spiritual system.

### 6.5: Apocalyptic revelations in contemporary spiritualities

The language of the contemporary phenomenon of 'channelling', according to Albanese, is derived from the 'technological shamanism' of the UFO contactee movement,<sup>402</sup> but the source of the channelled wisdom is generally perceived to be 'higher planes', and the phenomenon itself belongs to the wider genre of revelatory religious literature.<sup>403</sup> Training to become a channel employs techniques such as guided imagery, food restrictions, and the 'imposition of austerities' – injunctions that closely mirror Gnostic treatises, early Christian monastic literature, and the *ma'aseh merkabah*.<sup>404</sup> The cosmological revelations of Alice A. Bailey (1880-1949), produced in the first half of the twentieth century but still highly influential in contemporary spiritualities, are attributed to the channelled wisdom of a disincarnate spiritual teacher known as 'the Master Koot Hoomi'.<sup>405</sup> Bailey's books are modern apocalypses that, in terms of morphology rather than historical derivation, fit seamlessly into Collins' description of those constant elements characteristic of the apocalyptic genre of antiquity.<sup>406</sup>

Bailey never claimed to have made a heavenly ascent; she received her gnosis as 'concise, definite dictation' while in a fully conscious state.<sup>407</sup> But at the core of her revelations is the ascent of the soul, both individual and cosmic. Bailey's Theosophical

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<sup>401</sup> CH I.25, in *Hermetica*, p. 6.

<sup>402</sup> Albanese, 'Subtle Energies', p. 311.

<sup>403</sup> See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>404</sup> Hughes, 'Trance Channeling', p. 166. For a detailed survey of Gnostic ascetic practices, see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, pp. 140-150.

<sup>405</sup> Bailey, Alice A., *The Unfinished Autobiography* (New York, NY: Lucis Publishing, 1951) [hereafter Bailey, *Autobiography*], p. 37.

<sup>406</sup> Collins, *Apocalypse*, p. 9.

<sup>407</sup> Bailey, *Autobiography*, p. 167.

cosmology embraces one of the fundamental precepts of Platonism: ‘Space is an entity and the entire “vault of heaven”...is the phenomenal appearance of that entity’.<sup>408</sup> As usual, the *ochêmata* function as intermediaries between soul and body, susceptible to planetary influences because they are part of the World Soul.<sup>409</sup> The cosmos is structured in multiples of seven; the individual human soul belongs to one of the seven ‘Rays’, benign successors of the Gnostic archons, who are perceived as both energies and cosmic intelligences.<sup>410</sup> Individual evolution requires a succession of earthly incarnations, after each of which the soul sheds its *ochêmata* and returns to higher ‘levels of consciousness’.<sup>411</sup> The ascent is also expressed as a series of seven spiritual initiations undergone by the living disciple, who ascends to ‘the clear, pure light of the divine understanding’.<sup>412</sup> As the individual human soul evolves, so too does the World Soul. This idea is not unique to contemporary spiritualities, nor even newly developed in the late nineteenth century in response to Darwinian evolutionary theories, as Hanegraaff suggests.<sup>413</sup> The interweaving of human and cosmic evolution is found in the Kabbalah, in spiritual alchemy, and in Gnostic treatises that describe an ongoing cosmic process to rescue the ‘sparks of light’ from the dark depths of matter.<sup>414</sup> Although her work is procosmic rather than anticosmic, Bailey’s vision, like many Gnostic doctrines, encompasses a belief in supernatural powers responsible for ‘leading mankind out of darkness into Light, from the unreal to the Real and from death to Immortality’.<sup>415</sup>

The cosmologies and eschatologies of modern channelled apocalypses are remarkably similar, although the emphasis varies according to the individual medium. For example, Ruth

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<sup>408</sup> Bailey, Alice A., *Esoteric Astrology* (New York, NY: Lucis Publishing, 1951) [hereafter Bailey, *Esoteric Astrology*], p. 8. For the Platonic version, see Plato, *Timaeus*, 30c, in *Dialogues*, p. 1163. On Bailey’s experiences as a member of the Theosophical Society, see Bailey, *Autobiography*, pp. 137-159.

<sup>409</sup> Bailey, *Esoteric Astrology*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>410</sup> Bailey, Alice A., *Letters on Occult Meditation* (New York, NY: Lucis Publishing, 1972 [1922]), p. 15.

<sup>411</sup> Bailey, Alice A., *The Rays and the Initiations* (New York, NY: Lucis Publishing, 1960) [hereafter Bailey, *Rays and Initiations*], p. 14.

<sup>412</sup> Bailey, *Rays and Initiations*, p. 33.

<sup>413</sup> On Theosophy’s incorporation of Darwinian ideas, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 470-475.

<sup>414</sup> On cosmic evolution in the Kabbalah, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 53-58. On cosmic evolution in spiritual alchemy, see Versluis, pp. 131-32. On cosmic evolution in Gnosticism, see Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>415</sup> Bailey, *Autobiography*, p. 1.

White (1938- ) communicates the revelations of a spiritual guide and teacher called Gildas. His message, like that of Bailey's 'Master', is meant to enlighten those incarnate souls who are receptive to higher truths. Gildas informs us that when the body dies, the soul prepares to pass on to the 'next state'.<sup>416</sup> But in a somewhat more veridical presentation of the celestial ascent, Gildas declares that sometimes, after death, according to the experience necessary to the development of any particular soul, the new level of consciousness 'may indeed mean existence on another planet'.<sup>417</sup> Unlike Bailey and White, Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), an important source of inspiration for many contemporary channellers, does not claim to channel the wisdom of a disincarnate being.<sup>418</sup> Cayce's reincarnation readings, which reflect a strong Theosophical bias, incorporate both the idea of the post-mortem ascent of the soul to higher planes, and another idea that often accompanies the ascent: the *akasa* or 'Akashic Records', perceived as the source of Cayce's knowledge.<sup>419</sup> The *akasa* is the 'astral light' or 'universal ether' of the World Soul, with which the soul of a living individual unites in the momentary bliss of *unio mystica* and between earthly incarnations. This ancient concept, found in most Hellenic cosmologies as well as Western esoteric traditions, was reformulated in the nineteenth century by Lévi and then by Blavatsky.<sup>420</sup> As an idea, it displays as much persistence as the *ochêma*, or the idea of the celestial ascent itself.

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<sup>416</sup> White, Ruth and Mary Swainson, *Gildas Communicates: The Story and the Scripts* (London: Neville Spearman, 1971) [hereafter White and Swainson, *Gildas*], p. 110.

<sup>417</sup> White and Swainson, *Gildas*, p. 112.

<sup>418</sup> For a discussion of Cayce's work, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 34-37, 307-311, 316-318. For examples of Cayce's work, see Sugrue, Thomas, *There Is a River: The Story of Edgar Cayce* (New York, NY: Dell Publications, 1970 [1942]); Stearn, Jess, *Edgar Cayce: The Sleeping Prophet* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1968 [1967]); Cayce, Hugh Lynn, *Venture Inward* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1964); Cayce, Hugh Lynn, *The Edgar Cayce Reader* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1969).

<sup>419</sup> Reed, Henry, *Edgar Cayce on Mysteries of the Mind* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990), pp. 60-61.

<sup>420</sup> On the World Soul in Platonism and Neoplatonism, see Plato, *Timaeus*, 30b-c, 34b; Plotinus, *Ennead IV.9*; Dillon, *Middle Platonists*, pp. 45-46. On the World Soul in Stoicism, see Long and Sedley, p. 319. On the World Soul in Kabbalism, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, pp. 242-43. On the World Soul in Paracelsus, see Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, 1.8.160-64, 1.8.71-72, pp. 21, 39; Merkur, 'Otherworld', pp. 90-93. On the 'astral light' in Lévi, see Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 1.6, pp. 74-5; 1.17, pp. 149-50; 2.6, pp. 246-48; 2.21, p. 370. On the *akasa* in Theosophy, see Blavatsky, H. P., *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 1 (London: Theosophical Publishing Co., 1999 [1888]), pp. 76-77; Blavatsky, H. P., 'Nirvana-Moksha', in Blavatsky, CW14, p. 412; Blavatsky, H. P., Letter 71, in Blavatsky, H. P., *The Letters of H. P. Blavatsky*, Vol. 1, 1861-1879 (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 2003), p. 267. On the *akasa* in Anthroposophy, see Steiner, Rudolf, *Cosmic Memory: Atlantis and Lemuria*, trans. Karl E. Zimmer (Blauvelt, NY: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1971 [1959]), pp. 38-41. On Blavatsky's choice of an Indian term for a Western concept, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 454-55.

### 6.6: The celestial ascent as ‘individuation’

C. G. Jung (1875-1961), discussing the celestial ascent in relation to alchemy, informs us, ‘The journey through the planetary houses boils down to becoming conscious of the good and the bad qualities in our character, and the apotheosis means no more than maximum consciousness, which amounts to maximal freedom of the will.’<sup>421</sup> With this statement, the celestial ascent transforms into a symbolic map of ‘individuation’, the inner process through which an individual can achieve full integration of the personality. Jung perceived the expressions of the ascent in Gnostic, Hermetic, and alchemical texts as structurally similar to the processes through which his patients moved as they accessed the various levels of their inner worlds. The bypassing of the hostile Gnostic archons symbolises ‘the overcoming of a psychic obstacle, or of an autonomous complex, suitably represented by a planetary god or demon. Anyone who has passed through all the spheres is free from compulsion’.<sup>422</sup> Commenting on the celestial ascent described in the late fifteenth century *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* of Colonna, Jung notes that the author has left us a psychological document that is ‘a perfect example of the course and the symbolism of the individuation process.’<sup>423</sup>

Although he notes the relationship between the ‘seven phases of the alchemical process’ and the seven planetary spheres, Jung does not confine the individuation process to a specific number of steps such as seven or nine.<sup>424</sup> However, the initial and final phases of the process seem to correspond closely with the alchemical ascent, beginning with the ‘psychic suffering’ and ‘war on a moral plane’ of the Saturnian *nigredo*, and culminating in the solar alchemical gold: a direct inner experience which on a spiritual level reflects the soul’s ‘faculty of relationship to God’, and on a psychological level reflects the ‘unified self’.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Jung, *CW14*, para. 309.

<sup>422</sup> Jung, *CW14*, para. 308.

<sup>423</sup> Jung, *CW14*, para. 297.

<sup>424</sup> Jung, *CW13*, para. 398.

<sup>425</sup> Jung, *CW14*, para. 494; Jung, *CW12*, para. 11; Jung, *CW9ii*, para. 264.

This correlation between alchemical and psychological processes, Jung states, is not due to any imposition of an *a priori* esoteric model, but is ‘based first and foremost on my observations of people’.<sup>426</sup> In every human life, there is a development or movement towards some goal or end, and the alchemical stages ‘could just as well represent the individuation process of a single individual’.<sup>427</sup> Individuation is thus a psychological enactment of the archetypal pattern of the soul’s journey, which is also expressed symbolically in alchemical, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Hermetic, and Kabbalistic portrayals of the celestial ascent. While it occurs naturally in all people, techniques of analytic work such as active imagination deepen and enhance the process.<sup>428</sup> This model can justifiably be seen to reflect the contemporary ‘psychologization of religion and the sacralization of psychology’, and for this reason Hanegraaff questions Jung’s reliability: his psychology is ‘not a conclusion from empirical research but part of a religious belief system’.<sup>429</sup> Whether Hanegraaff’s conclusions are based on empirical research would require a discussion beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>430</sup> However, as we have seen, the celestial ascent was understood as an inner journey nearly two millennia before the term ‘individuation’ was formulated.

Jung’s model of individuation presents the celestial ascent as the symbol of an archetypal process of psychological and spiritual development. Various researchers exploring the ascent in specific cultural contexts have found Jung’s concepts valuable as a means of understanding the continuity and structural similarity of various ascent narratives. Corbin, discussing the ascent in eleventh century Islamic mysticism, makes frequent references to Jung’s alchemical exegeses, his theory of archetypal images, and his use of active

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<sup>426</sup> Jung, *CW12*, para. 2.

<sup>427</sup> Jung, *CW12*, para. 3; Jung, *CW14*, para. 792.

<sup>428</sup> Jung, *CW14*, paras. 752-55.

<sup>429</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, p. 507.

<sup>430</sup> For Hanegraaff’s full discussion on Jung, including his sources, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 496-513. On the tensions between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ in the study of religions, see McCutcheon, Russell T., ‘Introduction’, in *Insider/Outsider Problem*, pp. 15-22; Donovan, Peter, ‘Neutrality in Religious Studies’, in *Insider/Outsider Problem*, pp. 235-247.

imagination.<sup>431</sup> Merkur concludes that the combined use of visionary and ‘unitive’ experiences, dependent largely on the technique of active imagination, constitutes the revelation at the mystical core of Gnostic ideas in Western esotericism from late antiquity to modern times.<sup>432</sup> Shaw, discussing Iamblichus’ theurgical practices, compares them specifically to active imagination.<sup>433</sup> Idel, although cautious about any ‘mechanical’ application of Jung’s ‘Platonic perspective’, notes that a careful use of Jungian models may be helpful in understanding certain aspects of Kabbalistic mysticism.<sup>434</sup> Understanding the celestial ascent as an archetypal pattern, experienced as simultaneously subjective and objective, and envisioned in a wide range of images and forms, may be one of the more useful models currently available to explore the structure, continuity, and culturally mediated varieties of this enduring idea.

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<sup>431</sup> See, for example, Corbin, *Avicenna*, pp. 165, 208-222, 257-69; Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis*, pp. 78-79, 84.

<sup>432</sup> Merkur, *Gnosis*, p. ix.

<sup>433</sup> Shaw, ‘Containing Ecstasy’, pp. 53-87.

<sup>434</sup> Idel, *New Perspectives*, p. 25.

## Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Phenomenologically, the examples of the celestial ascent described in this paper cannot be considered identical, or even similar. There is little apparent resemblance between God's throne-chariot in early Jewish *merkabah* mysticism, the youthful god with the 'shining face' whom the adept meets in the 'Mithras Liturgy', the imageless stillness of Plotinus' *nousanodia*, the hermaphroditic Philosophers' Stone in the glass alembic of the alchemist's laboratory, the erotic embrace of Teresa of Avila's Christ, and the last of the Major Arcana of the Tarot, called 'The World'. All these portrayals of the culmination of the ascent are culture-specific; and because they are also individually envisaged, such portrayals do not always share any recognisable similarity even within a single cultural context. However, as this paper has shown, they have certain themes in common. These include dualism of body and soul; a distinct series of vertical levels or stages as aspects of a process; special preparatory requirements; a 'vehicle' in which the soul travels; the belief that the human being can precipitate or facilitate the journey through magical practices; and the aspiration 'to embrace God and be embraced by God'.<sup>435</sup> These themes form the structure, rather than the phenomenology, of the celestial ascent of the soul.

The motives and moral implications of the celestial ascent are also culture-specific. The *merkabah* mystic seeks divine encouragement and validation for his people; the Kabbalist seeks to assist the evolution of the cosmos; the Hermetic initiate seeks apotheosis; the Gnostic seeks freedom from the prison of incarnation; the nineteenth century occultist seeks personal power; the contemporary 'New Ager' seeks wholeness and the fulfilment of individual potential. The Christian ascetic suffers the guilt of Adam's sin; the Orphic initiate suffers for the sin of the Titans, committed before a human race existed; the Iamblichean

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<sup>435</sup> Luck, 'Theurgy and Forms of Worship', p. 189.

theurgist suffers the soul's choice to contribute to the unfolding of the One. Not only religious frameworks, but also social and political pressures, shape the expressions of the ascent. Himmelfarb proposes that God's *hekala* in the seventh heaven has as its architectural inspiration the destroyed sacred sanctuary of a scattered and oppressed people; no longer accessible on earth, the Temple is now envisioned in heaven.<sup>436</sup> Schipperges demonstrates that the Paracelsian alchemical ascent as a many-layered healing art reflects the impact on Hermetic thought of the new sciences emerging in Europe in the early modern era.<sup>437</sup> Edighoffer and Yates both describe the centrality of the post-Reformation crisis of early seventeenth century Germany in the spiritual ascent of the Rosicrucian Manifestos.<sup>438</sup> Hanegraaff, focusing on modern spiritualities, highlights the major role of Darwinian theories of evolution in the development of Blavatsky's Theosophical system.<sup>439</sup>

Because the celestial ascent is intimately linked with individual mystical experience, the nature of such experiences is an important aspect of the idea. The ascent may be seen as an RASC (religiously altered state of consciousness) or an RISC (religiously interpreted state of consciousness); the difference between these two terms lies in whether the researcher accepts the mystic's assertion of an altered state, or prefers to remain methodologically agnostic about what is being described.<sup>440</sup> 'It would not be outrageous', suggests Segal, 'to think that the adept was sitting on earth while the spirit roamed the heavens in a RISC'.<sup>441</sup> The celestial ascent in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* may reflect a personal mystical experience, but we cannot be certain. However, behind Cicero's narrative stands Plato, whose personal experience of *nousanodia* seems evident in his profound and detailed descriptions of it; and behind Plato stand quasi-mythic shamanic figures such as Pythagoras and

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<sup>436</sup> Himmelfarb, pp. 25-28, 42-46.

<sup>437</sup> Schipperges, p. 163-64.

<sup>438</sup> Edighoffer, 'Rosicrucianism', pp. 199-200; Yates, 'Rosicrucian Enlightenment', pp. 58-70.

<sup>439</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 465-67, 470-73.

<sup>440</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 323ff.

<sup>441</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, p. 333.

Empedocles, who, from pre-Socratic times, conjoin the idea of the celestial ascent with magic and the ecstasy of direct mystical experience.<sup>442</sup> Debates are ongoing in an effort to define what constitutes a mystical experience, who experiences them, what triggers them, and whether they are culturally constructed or share a transcultural, ontic core.<sup>443</sup>

The physiology of mystical experience can be demonstrated through CAT scans, MRIs, SPECTs, and other medical diagnostic means.<sup>444</sup> This determines that the experience of the celestial ascent is accompanied by specific physiological phenomena. Cognitive approaches often make ontological assumptions that are ultimately as unprovable as Plato's categorical statement that all soul is divine. However, despite this 'radical reductionism',<sup>445</sup> the interpretation of the celestial ascent as a cognitive phenomenon is a useful paradigm to highlight the manner in which the human mind expresses and interprets religious experience. Beck suggests that it is not necessary to espouse a materialist orientation in order to benefit from the positive contributions of cognitive scholarship: it is sufficient that cognitive approaches address the important question of how the human mind forms and organises religious ideas, regardless of their ultimate source.<sup>446</sup> The mind perceives representations such as the celestial ascent, 'not by virtue of membership in societies and cultures but by virtue of membership in the species *Homo sapiens*'.<sup>447</sup> These constantly mutating but structurally

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<sup>442</sup> On the magical mysticism of Empedocles, see Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy*, pp. 217-232; Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 145. On the magical mysticism of Pythagoras, see Burkert, *Ancient Pythagoreanism*, pp. 120-165. On Empedocles and Pythagoras as *iatromanteis* ('healer-seers'), see Couliano, *Psychanodia*, p. 1.

<sup>443</sup> From the vast corpus of literature on this subject, see especially Argyle, Michael, *Psychology and Religion: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000); Brainard, F. Samuel, 'Defining "Mystical Experience"', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer 1996), pp. 359-393; Fenton, John Y., 'Mystical Experience as a Bridge for Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion: A Critique', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (March 1981), pp. 51-76; Hood, Ralph W. Jr., 'The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 14 (1975), pp. 29-41; James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Viking Penguin, 1982 [1902]); Jung, C. G., *Psychology and Religion, CW11* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973 [1958]); King, Sallie B., 'Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 257-279; Stace, W. T., *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1960).

<sup>444</sup> Segal, *Life After Death*, pp. 334-35.

<sup>445</sup> On the 'radical reductionism' of cognitivism, see Saler, Benson, 'On what we may believe about beliefs', in *Religion in Mind*, p. 56.

<sup>446</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, p. 88.

<sup>447</sup> Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult*, p. 89.

similar representations bear a close family resemblance to the concept of archetypes, although cognitivists are usually eager to dissociate their models from Jung's. Jung's psychology, declares Couliano, is based on the assumption of 'certain inexplicable (or not yet explainable) "archetypes" that would be stored in the human "psyche" like a mysterious genetic code'.<sup>448</sup> This 'mysterious genetic code' is virtually indistinguishable from the 'mental representations' that Sperber argues are passed from one person to the next and from one culture to the next, through a mysterious and inexplicable process called 'intertextuality'.<sup>449</sup> The neurological reflections of the celestial ascent may correspond with the archetypal nature of the idea, existing as a pattern inherent in the manner in which we perceive reality – within, and perhaps even independently of, the individual brain that experiences and interprets it.

Post-enlightenment secularisation, with its apparent shift from a universe based on correspondences to one operating through instrumental causality, is a theory utilised by Hanegraaff to explain the appearance in contemporary Western spiritualities of apparently 'new' religious ideas blending older esoteric themes with modern scientific terminology. However, this hypothesis seems to overlook the mixture of participation and causality that has existed in the idea of the celestial ascent since antiquity. As this paper has shown, theurgic operations are central to the idea of the celestial ascent, and involve both correspondences and causality. From the sixth century BCE or earlier, the Orphics believed their gold *lamellae* would 'cause' the soul to be granted passage to those celestial realms with which the human soul was connected through consubstantiality. Both modes of perception are also evident in the *merkabah* mystics' uninhibited blending of the idea of a unified cosmos with the causality of magical adjurations, and in the procedures of alchemy, which,

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<sup>448</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, p. 5.

<sup>449</sup> On 'mental representations', see Sperber, Dan, 'Anthropology and Psychology: Towards an Epimediology of Representations', *Man*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1985) pp. 73-89; Andresen, 'Introduction: towards a cognitive science of religion', in *Religion in Mind*, pp. 17-18. On intertextuality, see Couliano, *Out of This World*, pp. 8-11.

from the time of Zosimos, combined the causality of metallurgic processes and the correspondences between metals, planets, and the human soul. The idea of the soul's ascent may thus be particularly well suited to make the passage into the modern world and provide the structure for many of the elements in contemporary spiritualities, particularly those based on the concept of initiatic transformations and a theurgically induced process of spiritual evolution. The combination of correspondences and causality integral to the idea may be a primary reason for its longevity and adaptability in widely diverse cultural settings.

Idel recommends 'methodological eclecticism' in exploring any religious phenomenon, and the celestial ascent of the soul belongs to the religious domain.<sup>450</sup> The morphological approach emphasised in this paper does not appear to be utilised in any overview of the celestial ascent from antiquity to contemporary spiritualities, although Couliano favours it in his examination of Gnostic dualism.<sup>451</sup> This paper has focused on the structural consistency beneath the kaleidoscope of culture-specific images and interpretations of the celestial ascent, without postulating the necessity of either an ontological reality or a unitary religious tradition mysteriously transmitted through the ages. Smith warns about the 'Romantic, Neoplatonic Idealism' implicit in the morphological approach, comparing it with the *Naturphilosophie* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: it has as a necessary presupposition a notion of economy, in which there are relatively few 'original elements' from which complex systems are generated, while both internal and external forces operate on these 'original elements' to produce variety and differentiation.<sup>452</sup> However, Smith eloquently demonstrates that all approaches to the study of religion – comparative, historical, ethnographic, encyclopaedic, morphological, and evolutionary – suffer from *a priori* assumptions; and a morphological methodology is perhaps the most flexible in being able to

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<sup>450</sup> Idel, *Ascensions*, p. 1.

<sup>451</sup> Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis*, pp. 1-22.

<sup>452</sup> Smith, Jonathan Z., *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) [hereafter Smith, *Imagining Religion*], pp. 20-25.

balance its shortcomings by acknowledging the importance of cultural context in the development and continuity of a religious idea.<sup>453</sup>

Understanding the idea of the celestial ascent as an archetypal pattern, ceaselessly amalgamating with other ideas as well as cultural factors to generate unpredictable new combinations, allows the idea both structural integrity and unlimited diversity in terms of its cultural expressions. A recognition of differing human responses, reflected in both individual and cultural predispositions, and a willingness to adopt ontological agnosticism, can rescue the idea from the reductionism of a purely functionalist approach. The thorny issue of whether a narrator, or a researcher, interprets the soul's ascent as veridical or symbolic, may depend more on individual predisposition than on the validity of the evolutionist idea of 'myth' growing up and becoming 'mysticism', 'philosophy' or 'science', or the subtler but equally evolutionist idea that only secularised, 'disenchanted' moderns expect to encounter the divine in the individual psyche.<sup>454</sup> The simultaneity of subjective and objective experiences of the celestial ascent throughout history, and its remarkable structural continuity, challenge some of the most cherished paradigms of contemporary scholarship and, as Latour suggests, raise questions about the assumption that we are 'modern'.<sup>455</sup>

Smith points out that the notion of myth as 'bad science' still lingers even in the post-modern era, resulting in confusion between a correlation and an identity.<sup>456</sup> It is questionable whether there ever was, or could be, a purely objective or purely subjective individual experience of the idea of the celestial ascent, except in the interpretations of individual researchers. Ideas with apparent autonomy or 'agency', which might also be understood as

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<sup>453</sup> Smith, *Imagining Religion*, pp. 26-35.

<sup>454</sup> On the sociological hypothesis of 'enchantment' and 'disenchantment', see Weber, Max, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Bischoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993 [1963]); Sharot, pp. 278-79; Hanegraaff, 'How magic survived', pp. 357-60; Willis, Roy and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 77-84.

<sup>455</sup> Latour, p. 107.

<sup>456</sup> Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, p. 128.

archetypal patterns, may be seen to inform the changing paradigms of science, philosophy, psychology, religion, and the arts as they mutate and clothe themselves in the language of particular cultural contexts. This dimension of the historical development of ideas merits further research. Interiorised expressions of the celestial ascent in contemporary spiritualities may reflect the transmission of the idea in new, secularised forms. But such expressions may also reflect an archetypal pattern that interacts in an entirely logical way with specific cultural paradigms, just as it has always done. These interactions can precipitate transformations in both the individuals and the cultural context in which the idea is active, resulting in the development of new religious forms. The idea endures, not only because it has been transmitted, but because, as an archetypal narrative with ‘agency’, its attractiveness and resonance are able to ensure its continuing transmission. Modern secularisation and pluralism have provided a new range of languages and paradigms through which the celestial ascent of the soul can be experienced and understood. But the idea itself remains structurally consistent and capable of undergoing further permutations. Rather than representing an innovative ‘New Age’ religious idea, the emergence of the celestial ascent in contemporary spiritualities demonstrates its continuity from the ancient world to the present day.

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