

## A.L.M. Thesis Research Proposal

### Tentative Title:

Celestial Intelligences: Cabala, Angelic Hierarchies, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Syncretic  
Philosophy



Giovanni Pico della Mirandola

May 25, 2016

## Research Problem

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), from this point forward referred to as Pico, was one of the most interesting philosophers of the Renaissance era. “His contemporaries spoke of him as a phoenix, a miracle of nature, a hero, the marvel of the age. For centuries after his death writers continued to refer to him as a rare and exceptional phenomenon, a freak or prodigy in the intellectual sphere.” (Craven 1) Pico’s writings have been interpreted by scholars for generations and his philosophy is generally accepted as part of the Humanist tradition. But his work was syncretic and despite many attempts to classify or categorize it, no single label suffices. Pico’s most widely known work, posthumously titled as *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), was originally intended as a preface to his *900 Theses* (1486) – a treatise meant to be debated at the Vatican the following year. The debate never occurred because the Church condemned Pico’s work, partly because Pico asserted that the Cabala proved that the Christian faith was true. Pico was the first to ever publicly express this idea, but he would not be the last.

Pico’s enthusiasm for, and subsequent adoption of this Jewish esoteric tradition sparked a movement in Europe, and mystically-minded Christians followed suit beginning in the early sixteenth century. The phenomenon of Christian Cabalism was widespread within all esoteric, fraternal, chivalric, and mystical circles in Europe and was facilitated by Christian converts in an act of appropriation. This was possible due to an inadvertent side-effect of the Spanish Inquisition being that some who fled Spain in the fifteenth century made their way to Italy, teachers and translators of the Cabala among them. Modern research has also revealed the manner in which conversion was affected by the tension created between formal religious Judaism and esoteric Cabalism within European Jewish communities. There are examples of Jews converting under duress to another faith tradition, but retaining their Cabalistic ideas and practices and then teaching and translating for their new co-religionists. This is precisely what occurred in Pico’s case – his primary translator and teacher, known as Flavius Mithridates, was a Spanish convert who taught Hebrew, the Cabala, and translated many, if not all, the major Cabalistic texts from Hebrew to Latin. Despite the fact that the disputation of the *900 Theses* never took place, the work behind it remains significant to the study of the history of western esotericism because Pico was responsible for promoting the

validity and veracity of the Cabala in a Christian milieu. It should also be recognized that the Christianity that Pico adhered to was by no means orthodox. His conception of Christianity was complex, nuanced, and affected by vastly different interpretations of the past. Suffice it to say that Pico saw his Christian faith as the evolution of a timeless wisdom tradition that encompassed all the ancient schools, though much of this knowledge was hidden by time or necessity. But the extent that Cabalism underlay Pico's own writing and thinking is still being uncovered; one avenue to approach this is his references to angels in the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

In Pico's *Oration*, he repeatedly mentions angels as part of the order of creation as well as their relationship to humanity. He described the angels as rational intelligences whose attitudes and behaviors could be emulated in order to raise oneself in a moral, philosophical, and spiritual sense.

“Let us put in last place whatever is of the world; and let us fly beyond the chambers of the world to the chamber nearest the most lofty divinity. There, as the most sacred mysteries reveal, the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones occupy the first places. Ignorant of how to yield to them and unable to endure the second places, let us compete with the angels in dignity and glory. When we have willed it, we shall be not at all below them... If we too live that life – for we can – we shall equal their lot. The seraph burns with the fire of charity; the cherub shines with the radiance of intelligence; the throne stands in steadfastness of judgement.” (Pico *Oration* 7)

Pico also writes of Jacob's ladder, the ascent and descent of the angels, and how one must learn to reason, and then philosophize with intelligence like the cherubim in order to finally rise to the top of the ladder with holy theology to love God as the seraphim or to descend to the level of the thrones and exercise judgement and morality in the world. While he surely knew of Iamblichus and Pseudo-Dionysus, Pico also reveals where he learned of the angels and their metaphysics: the Cabala.

“These are the books of the knowledge of Cabala. Esdras proclaimed at the beginning in a clear voice that in these books was rightly the heart of understanding, that is, an ineffable theology of supersubstantial deity, the fountain of wisdom, that is, an exact metaphysics of intelligible angels and forms, and the river of knowledge, that is, a most sure philosophy of natural things.” (Pico *Oration* 31)

Pico's concern with angels here is primarily philosophical, using biblical references to support his argument, but its ultimate purpose is metaphysical. His concern is neither magical nor theurgical, as he mentions that Cabala is of a higher nature than natural magic, based on his description. From a Neoplatonic perspective, Pico's position here can be seen as unifying aspects of Iamblichus and Pseudo-Dionysus

(extensive metaphysics of angels) with those of Plotinus (philosophical contemplation is required to ascend, not theurgical rites) (Finamore "Plotinus" 83), which is completely in character with Pico's syncretic views in almost every area of knowledge. The aspects of the Cabala that Pico employs are both readily apparent and occulted. The superficial were his references to the tradition as an authority on metaphysics and aspects of biblical interpretation, while the more substantial instances were hidden within his writing. These hidden aspects become revealed once Pico's deep study of Cabalism is understood.

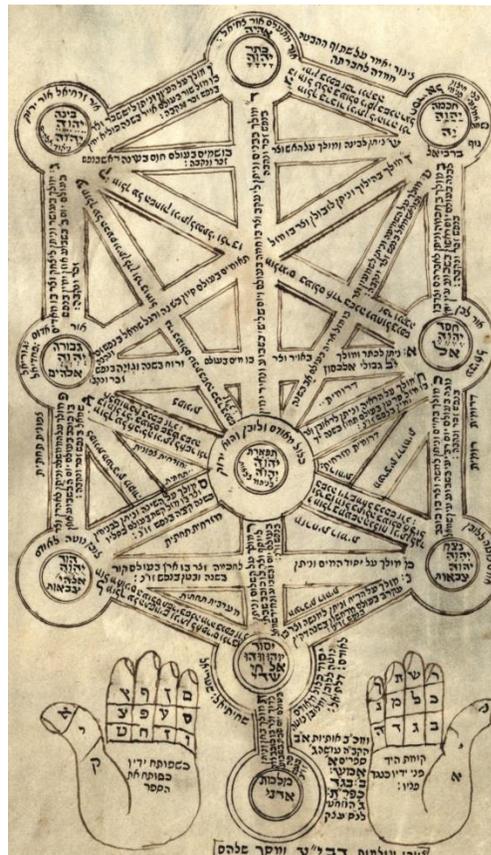
As described by Pico, philosophy and natural magic were the disciplines and arts by which one could understand the natural world and thereby humans, who were reflections of the natural world to a great extent. "... Know thyself arouses us and urges us towards the knowledge of nature, of which man's nature is the medium and, as it were, the union. For he who knows himself, knows all things in himself ..." (Pico *Oration* 14-5) But in order to come to a higher understanding - that of the bible and the angels, a theology and metaphysics was required. According to Pico, the Cabala reinforced the Christian faith and was, for a variety of reasons, the esoteric tradition he exalted, and so became for him the ultimate authority in understanding cosmology, anthropogony, theology, angelology, and metaphysics generally. The Cabala held this authoritative position not only because it was believed that this tradition was received by Moses on Mount Sinai along with the Torah, but because its techniques were also used to decipher the hidden meaning in the New Testament and verified the status of Christ as the messiah (according to Pico and his teachers).

The Cabala is a metaphysical system of religious philosophy concerned primarily with God, creation of the cosmos, humanity, and the relationship between them.

"According to the kabbalistic tradition, the transcendent divine essence known as *ein sof* (the endless) or *ayyin* (the nothing) created the cosmos through a process of emanation in which a series of ten *sefirot* (luminosities) [known collectively as the Tree of Life] mediate the continuum of being that connects the physical universe to God. According to this model, the *sefirot*, which are described with strikingly paradoxical and apophatic language as the ten that are simultaneously one and infinite, channel the divine *shefa* (overflow) into the world, sustaining the fabric of being and bringing blessing to humanity. Due to the exile of the Jewish people from their land, as well as a history of Jewish violation of covenantal law, the interconnections between the *sefirot*, according to the kabbalists, are damaged, and the lowest *sefirah*, *Shekhinah* or the divine feminine presence, accompanies the Israelites in their exile, sharing and embodying their longing for reintegration into the Godhead. The kabbalists claim, however, that their esoteric teachings concerning this

theosophy enable Jews to repair the damage to the sefirot by means of the performance of Jewish law and ritual as well as the study of Jewish texts through a kabbalistic lens. In short, the Kabbalah is a claim to secret knowledge that presents a bold and forceful reformulation of Judaism as the mechanism whereby the very being of the cosmos is maintained.” (Lachter 1-3)

The primary metaphysical diagram of the Cabala is the Tree of Life, and throughout this paper it presents itself in a number of forms: (1) the metaphorical Jacob’s ladder described in the bible and referred to in Pico’s *Oration*, (2) the Cabalistic metaphysical diagram that is used to classify everything, including hierarchies of angels, and (3) a non-linear hierarchical design for interpreting reality at various levels. Pico’s syncretic philosophy in *900 Theses* revealed a philosophical method that emulated the angels ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder, or Tree of Life, and therefore imbued his philosophy with a divine pattern. By doing so, Pico had devised a new syncretic, but Christian, philosophical tradition that recognized the contributions of the Cabala as especially instructional in the use of philosophy and linguistics to ascend spiritually.



Tree of Life from a scroll similar to The Great Parchment - one of the scrolls from Pico's library, now held by the Vatican (image: Cosmological Forests - Kabbalistic Divinity Maps U. of Haifa, [http://research.haifa.ac.il/~chajes/chajes/maps\\_files/besht.jpg](http://research.haifa.ac.il/~chajes/chajes/maps_files/besht.jpg))

For a variety of reasons, Pico's engagement with the Cabala was incredibly fruitful. In order to properly understand the phenomenon of a Christian philosopher adopting a Jewish esoteric tradition during a time of extreme religious intolerance, the context is crucial. Pico adopted the Cabala not only because he found commonality with Neoplatonism and that it had its origins in a monotheistic faith tradition, but mainly because of the evidence of the veracity of the Christian faith that he found, or was led to by his teacher. Pico believed that Jews were blind or ignorant of these truths, and that the Cabala should be appropriated from its originators since they were ignorant of the value of their own tradition.

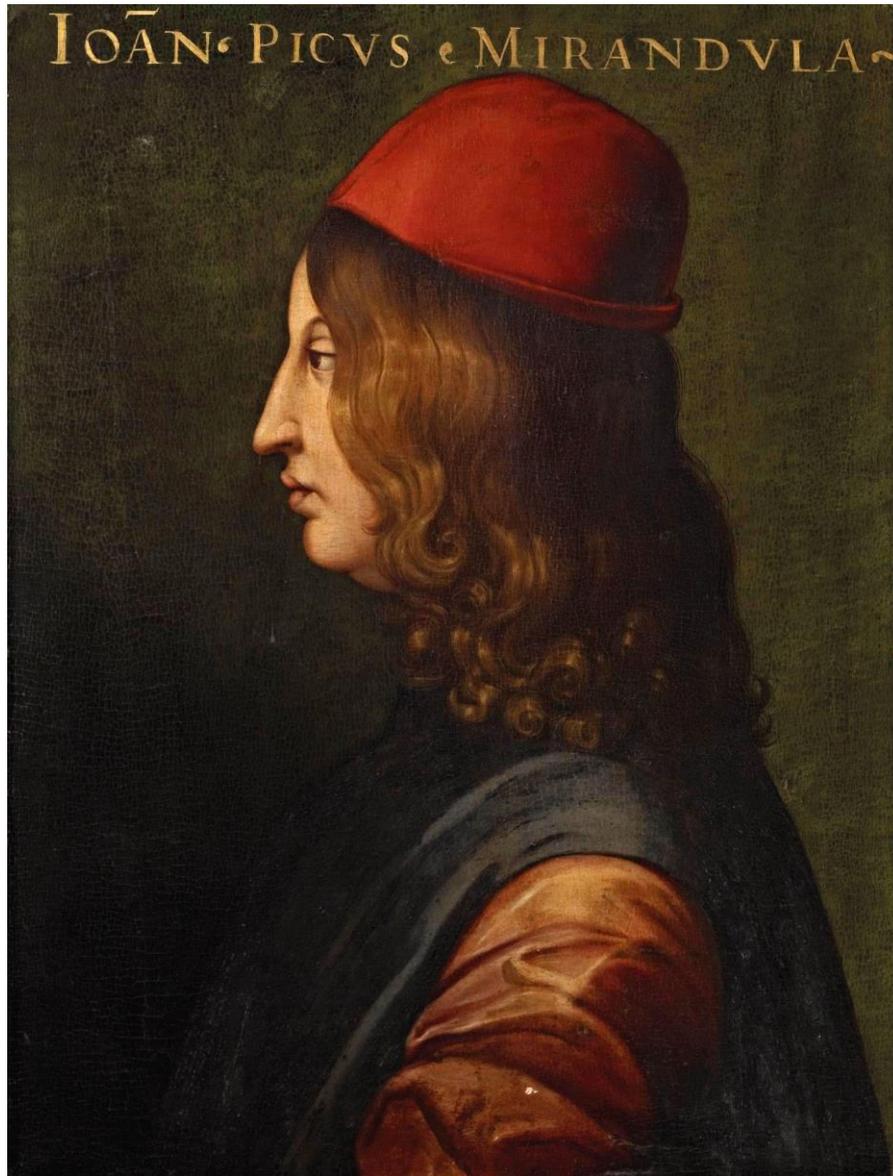
“The strategy is clear: On the one hand, Pico wants to show that the Jewish mystical tradition proves the Christian truth (and thus, we could also argue that Pico's intention is to convert his Christian readers to Cabala!); on the other hand, he wants to use kabbalistic tradition to convince the Jews and convert them to Christianity. Not surprisingly, Klaus Reichert concludes, “These are not optional readings but decisive ones, and Christian Kabbalists to come knew how to proceed... Thus the entrance of Jewish thinking into the ken of Christianity was a double-edged affair: it opened up new continents of meaning and at the same time it was taken out of the hands of their originators in an act of appropriation and supersession.” (Von Stuckrad “Christian Cabala and Anti-Jewish Polemics” 4)

Because of the scholarship on the subject, Pico's sources are known, including texts, translators, and teachers. Pico's extensive library of Cabalistic texts and his relationship with Flavius Mithridates, a Christian convert who was one of the teachers of the Cabala detailed in Chaim Wizurbski's study, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, inform us that Pico took this subject very seriously. It is also widely recognized that Pico was highly educated, but also an original thinker. When assessing Pico's syncretic philosophy, contained in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* and *900 Theses*, the references to the Cabala and its metaphysics of angels are clear on the surface. But if we take Pico at his word that the Cabala was a river of knowledge, a fountain of wisdom, and an ineffable theology, it must have had a profound impact on not only his faith in Christianity, but also on his philosophy.

### **Question**

Is it possible that Pico, considered by his peers to be one of the greatest minds of his generation, took a once exclusively Jewish esoteric tradition and then from it theorized the use of Jacob's ladder (Tree of Life) along with corresponding hierarchies of angels not only as an emulative model for spiritual ascension in his

*Oration*, but also as an intellectual model in the *900 Theses* for interpreting reality at different levels to provide a structure in which the entirety of creation was seen as united in the mind of the philosopher?



### **Hypothesis**

Pico viewed angels not only as celestial intelligences which could influence and communicate, but more so as emulative models for human attitude and behavior. To be clear, Pico's angelology was philosophical and metaphysical, not magical or theurgical. Pico specifically mentions the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder in his *Oration*. Then in his *900 Theses*, he uses a variety of philosophical and linguistic devices to conceptualize aspects of creation to view from different levels, thereby reconciling

polarities and apparent paradoxes – as if he were philosophically traversing Jacob’s ladder (or Tree of Life). If we interpret the philosophy expounded in Pico’s *Oration* in a systemic way, as a prescriptive method for the divinization of humans, it is required that our analysis be methodical in order to glimpse the underlying assumptions and ideas that this philosophy is constructed upon. Essentially, Pico developed a linguistic method that involved modifying descriptive terms to allow him to interpret something (such as the characteristic of beauty) from different levels or perspectives. When understood in the light of Pico’s deep interest in the study of the Cabala and his profession of its significance to Christianity, his philosophical methods can be seen as analogous to the angels traversing a metaphorical Tree of Life, or Jacob’s ladder. If this were his intent, as the evidence suggests, Pico’s philosophy holds a layer of meaning that has not yet been elucidated by scholars, or by Pico himself, remaining hidden in plain sight. It is long overdue that this aspect of Pico’s brilliance be recognized and appreciated. In so doing, the impact of the Cabala upon Pico’s philosophy and metaphysics becomes almost as clear as the impact it had upon his Christian faith.

The Cabala approaches creation itself from a non-linear hierarchical perspective and its metaphysical model, known as the Tree of Life, influenced Pico’s work in two ways. First, in a superficial sense, is the manner that he appeals to the Cabala as the authority on metaphysics and theology about which he openly writes. The second is a more profound, fundamental, but hidden manner in which the very nature of his philosophy was predicated on the ability to move between hierarchies and levels of understanding so that all was unified – not only in a metaphysical sense, but intellectually and philosophically. Pico performed what he described man as capable of when assuming the attitude and behavior of the celestial intelligences by composing and attempting to publicly dispute his theses. In so doing, he elucidated an intellectual, philosophical, and contemplative approach to spirituality where the faculty of intelligence, once mastered, provided the foundation for both moral judgement and loving devotion to God.

It is important to consider Pico’s views on the relationship between angels and intellect because it provides some insight into his program of ascension and why it is a philosophical, intellectual, and contemplative method instead of theurgical or magical. When interpreting the Pico’s view on the intellect,

the mind, or the faculty of intelligence, there are two assumptions that are crucial, one is explicit in his works, but the other is not. First are explicit, numerous references to angels as intelligences. In fact, the cherubim, the middle order of angels mentioned in his *Oration* is noted specifically for their intelligence.

“Therefore with his own light the cherub in the middle makes us ready for the seraphic fire, and at the same time illuminates us for the judgment of the thrones. He is the bond of the first minds, the order of Pallas, the ruler over contemplative philosophy. We must rival him and embrace him and lay hold of him. Let us make ourselves one with him and be caught up to the heights of love. And let us descend to the duties of action, well instructed and prepared.” (Pico *Oration* 8)

Pico also held the conviction that, on some level, all human intelligence is united, which he never explicitly stated, (Still “Pico’s Quest for All Knowledge” *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* 187) but must be considered. The importance of this faculty and the significance of it being the single named characteristic possessed by both humans and angels should not be overlooked. In order to ascend from human to angelic to God-like in Pico’s system required the willful application of intelligence by which one could access not only the human and worldly realms of knowledge, but with esoteric keys to decipher the holy texts, those of the angels and beyond. Pico implied that the human intellect could ascend to angelic realms and beyond in a contemplative sense. His interpretation was certainly not a literal ascension, nor a theurgical one; it was the path of the scholar, philosopher, and contemplative mystic. The Cabala also lends itself to this type of hyper-intellectualization. In fact, of the three modes of Cabalistic expression or practice, one is speculative which is considered philosophical (the type Pico used in his *Oration*), the other types include mystical or ecstatic, and practical or magical. Even today, this speculative Cabala is practiced through study, contemplation, and discussion.

While some scholars dispute Pico’s Cabalistic interests, more modern research has uncovered the deep study of Hebrew and the Cabala undertaken by Pico in the years leading up to his planned disputation in 1487. To those who understood, Pico included various clues within his *Oration* before he even announced his interest in the Cabala. For example, Copenhaver’s study, *The Secret of Pico’s Oration*, describes the deep knowledge of Cabalism that Pico employed in his language, alluding to the Tree of Life even as he discussed Jacob and the straight ascent to heaven via the ladder of the angels, referencing an obscure work by Jewish Cabalist Joseph Gikatilla. (Coperhaven 68-9) This metaphysical device – The Tree

of Life, also known as Jacob's ladder, became an analogue for Pico in the development of a specific linguistic technique that would allow the philosopher to intellectually ascend or descend just like the angels.

In *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (2006), Crofton Black convincingly demonstrates that Pico's Cabalistic studies had a great impact on his composition of *Heptaplus* (1489). Like the *900 Theses*, the Cabalistic influence in *Heptaplus* is hidden under the surface and not openly disclosed in the same way Pico discussed the Cabala in his *Oration*. Despite the fact that the *Heptaplus* remains outside the scope of this research, this secondary source is of particular significance to proving the hypothesis by demonstrating a continuation of Pico's capacity to adapt Cabalistic ideas in innovative ways.

In his epic study, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)*, S. A. Farmer describes Pico's most used method for syncretizing various philosophies, wisdom traditions, mythologies, and more.

*"Hierarchical or correlative distinctions ... these were Pico's most typical syncretic devices. While the standard scholastic distinction typically led to binary divisions of concepts - substance or accident, real or intentional existence, speculative or practical science, and so on - once organized in correlative series these could be multiplied in a nearly endless fashion, limited only by a commentator's ingenuity in inventing verbal modifiers for some base term. This method is beautifully illustrated in a thesis that contains one of the most extreme examples of hierarchical thinking known... The seven levels of reality distinguished in this thesis show up repeatedly in Pico's theses presented "according to his own opinion":*

*"5>26. Beauty exists in God as its cause, in the total intellectual truly essentially totally, in the particular intellect truly partially essentially, in the rational soul truly participationally, in the visible accidents of the heavens imagerially essentially totally, in subcelestial visible qualities imagerially partially essentially, in quantities imagerially participationally. [!]*

*"Pico most often invoked extreme correlative distinctions like these to unveil the secret concords of the ancients - his apparent object here was to harmonize ideas in the Platonic corpus with elements of this own system - but these methods could be used just as well to effect full or partial reconciliations of more recent traditions..." (Farmer 66-7)*

By unpacking the implications inherent in Pico's philosophical approach to syncretic philosophy, we can apprehend the influence of the Cabala and its non-linear hierarchical models of creation and levels of intellect. The Cabalistic Tree of Life was used as a metaphysical model that could encompass various aspects of intelligence, hierarchies of angels, classical planets of astrology, and much more within its spheres since it is a model of all creation. Pico believed that humans could use their individual minds, through philosophical disputation, to ascend towards a union with the divine, similar to angels ascending the ladder. In interpreting Pico's *Oration* and *900 Theses* as not only a description of the potential unification of

creation within an intellectual, philosophical, and metaphysical framework, but the public disputation of it (philosophy in practice) at the Vatican in front of the Pope and Church hierarchy would have amounted to an attempt to ascend in a manner and place of supreme significance. When seen in this light, the adjectives bold and audacious barely begin to describe the endeavor that Pico undertook, and in so doing, he was putting into practice the exact formula he prescribed in the *Oration* for employing the angelic intelligences as emulative models.

### **Conclusions and Broader Implications**

Pico's strong affinity for the Cabala is illustrated partly by the use of hierarchy within his philosophy. Pico's syncretic philosophy endeavored to view the entirety of creation as a unified whole by traveling between levels of philosophical understanding using linguistic device. The Cabala models the entirety of creation within a non-linear hierarchical symbol whereby groups of angels reside at specific spheres, but man has the capability to travel between the spheres to experience the various expressions of the divine.

The inevitable conclusion from accepting the totality of evidence supporting the hypothesis is that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's adoption of the Cabala was not only integral to his Christian faith, but also to his philosophy. The impact his study of the Cabala had upon the manner in which he approached philosophy and the unification of all knowledge in his *900 Theses* was precisely the sort of reintegration that the Cabala calls the "Path of Return" - the journey to ultimate reabsorption with the first cause. Furthermore, Pico's act in publicly revealing his syncretic philosophy and its source, along with his attempt to legitimize the Cabala with religious authorities, paved the way for the Cabala to become integral to all subsequent forms of western esotericism.

This legitimization via blending with Cabala was an important milestone for the history of western esotericism, and arguably the history of religion. Effectively, a group of Christian philosophers and mystics appropriated an esoteric tradition and adapted it to their own purposes. It must be understood that at the time, it was commonly held that the Cabala was the original ancient wisdom tradition handed down by God to the first man, or at least to Moses, and all subsequent mystery cults and sages including Egyptian, Persian,

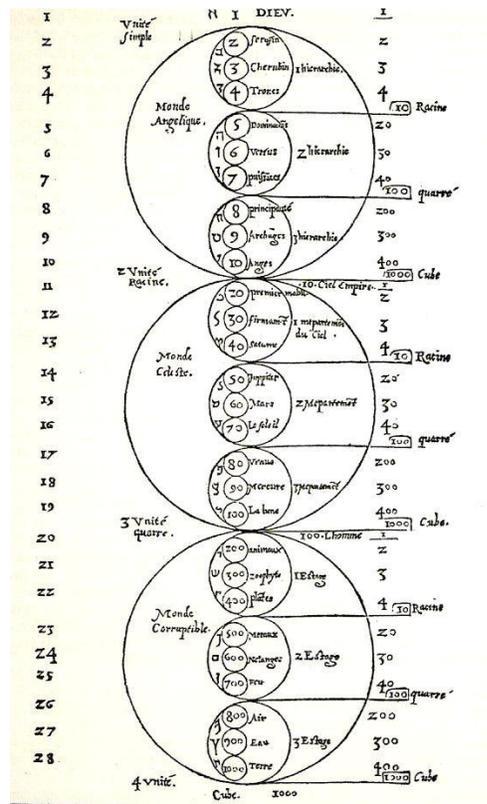
and Greek were descended from the Hebrew tradition. Today we know that exactly the reverse is more likely to be accurate, but this belief in the authenticity of the Cabala lent it an authority that led mystics, seekers, and esotericists to hold it in such high regard. Pico's role in this process is ever more clear and becoming increasingly significant.

Clearly, the adaptation of Cabala was concerned not with formal religious doctrine and practice, but with a more personal understanding of the divine and the angelic hierarchies, biblical interpretation, exegetical techniques, and methods for practicing these esoteric arts. In Pico's case, his understanding of the Cabalistic tradition, texts, and philosophies engendered a greater concordance with his understanding of Christianity, resulting in a syncretism that in no way honored the Jewish tradition on its own terms. Instead, Pico's syncretism, with Cabalism at its heart, was entirely in the service of a greater cause – the transcendent union of the One, which he interpreted from a Christian, albeit unorthodox, perspective.

In terms of how this appropriation and supersession of their esoteric tradition affected relations between Jews and Christians during this time, we can also observe the double-edged nature of this phenomenon. On one hand, Christian intellectuals revered the teachers and translators of the Cabala whether Jew or Christian convert, but for Jews unconcerned with this esoteric tradition, which was most, there was only disdain. The Cabala learned from the Jews was only to be used as a weapon against them for conversion and persecution. The paradoxical nature of western esotericism's inherent anti-Judaism has never been reconciled and is a topic deserving of further research.

The larger significance of the adoption of Cabalism as the veritable foundation of western esotericism and a hidden influence within western philosophy also begins to emerge. If this thesis hypothesis is correct, it means that Cabalism underlay Pico's entire philosophy. Accepting this would overturn a good deal of existing scholarship about Pico where historians attribute his primary influence elsewhere. It would also imply that the Cabala had a much more significant influence upon intellectual life in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance eras than has previously been acknowledged. Furthermore, it could be argued that the adoption of an esoteric tradition created by a people in exile during a time of intolerance was facilitated by the outsider nature of the philosophies promoted, including: (1) the

importance of individual humans in maintaining the balance of the cosmos through proper thought, word, and deed (as opposed to God, kings and bishops), (2) a messianism that was interpreted as utopianism in a Christian milieu, (3) the dialectics of secrecy and revelation as central to esoteric theory and practice, and (4) an ambivalence towards established religious, political, and social authorities. Deeply embedding an esoteric system that is ambivalent towards traditional established order has inevitable effects on history, religion, and the development of society. Our fundamental ways of thinking have arguably been affected, in many areas of knowledge (philosophy, religion, science, and more) by the introduction of Cabala into the thinking of some of the most prominent intellectuals of Europe between the late fifteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries and we have Giovanni Pico della Mirandola to thank, and / or blame, for that.



Three Worlds diagram from Pico's *Heptaplus*

(Nota Bene: The diagram consists of a hierarchical organization of circles (or spheres) and Hebrew letters are associated with each level of the hierarchy.)

## Definition of Terms

- **Cabala** – Refers to: (1) the Jewish esoteric tradition involving models of creation, meditational and contemplative techniques, mystical exegesis, divine names, and ciphers which has philosophical, mystical, and practical modes of study and application. The

tradition is thought to be ancient, but scholars date its public emergence to the twelfth century. The primary texts include *Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation)*, *Sefer ha-Bahir (Book of the Brilliance)*, and *Sefer ha-Zohar (Book of Splendor)*. Often spelled as Kabbalah. (2) The Christian adaptation of the Jewish tradition for the purposes of validating the Christian faith, a vehicle for spiritual ascent, and as a weapon for conversion. Christian philosophers found Neoplatonic, gnostic, and Hermetic influences, interpreting this to mean that the Hebrew sages were the originators of the ancient wisdom that descended through Egypt, Greece, and Persia prior to the advent of Christianity. Often spelled as Cabala. (3) The Hermetic, post-Christian adaptation blending Cabala with astrology, ceremonial magic, alchemy, and the rites of fraternal orders. Often spelled as Qabalah. [See also the Lachter quote on page 3](#). In order to standardize and reduce confusion, wherever possible the spelling 'Cabala' is used in this document.

- **Esotericism** – having to do with secret realms of knowledge, emanating from a spiritual center that can only be attained by following prescribed methods or techniques of various schools of initiatory traditions which teach them. This secret, or inner, knowledge is distinguished from exoteric or superficial religious study and practice.
- **Neoplatonism** – a Hellenistic philosophical tradition that posits that the entire cosmos emanates from a single One and centered primarily around the work of philosophical teachers Plotinus, Porphyry, Ammonias Saccas, Iamblichus, Proclus, and others.
- **Tree of Life** – a Cabalistic concept derived from the Book of Genesis and symbolically represented by 10 spheres arranged systematically and connected by a number of paths (usually 22), although the Tree is dynamic so multiple iterations exist. Should be considered as a metaphorical metaphysical diagram or device symbolic of the creation of the cosmos from nothing to the physical world. The tree can also be used as a map for a path of spiritual ascension. The spheres correspond to divine qualities, hierarchies of angels, planets, alchemical metals, etc. The paths correspond to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The Tree of Life symbolic diagram has become the most accepted and widely-used metaphysical diagram in western esotericism.
- **Western esotericism** – refers to a group of schools and disciplines that coalesced from the Platonic Orientalism and Hermeticism of the late-medieval and early Renaissance periods. These include, but are not limited to, alchemy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, ceremonial magic, Christian theosophy, neo-Templarism, Illuminism, and various occult societies. In addition to Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism, the groups which can be categorized under this rubric also made extensive use of the Cabala.

## Background of the Problem

Because this research proposal deals with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's syncretic philosophy, most eloquently expressed in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, and an investigation into the connections between this philosophy and Cabalism, there are actually two separate, but intersecting areas of scholarship which must be considered. The first is Pico and his philosophy for which the relevant scholarship is voluminous. The second area, that of Cabalism, but more specifically the adoption and adaptation of the Jewish tradition by Christian intellectuals supported by Christian converts, is much more recent. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, serious exploration began, but has only blossomed in the past 30 years. This is

quite advantageous because we have the benefit of a more extensive foundation of scholarship than those that analyzed Pico's work beforehand.

Generally, the scholarship on Pico and his writings has focused on his extraordinary education and life as an important philosopher of Italian nobility and attempted to categorize him and his work. These categories are approximations, but can be described as (1) Neoplatonist, (2) Cabalist, (3) original idealist philosopher (humanism and syncretism), and (4) scholastic. (Dulles xi) There is valid support for each of these positions as evidenced by the extant scholarship. Because of the vast corpus of work on Pico, which stretches back over 500 years and many languages, much of it not available in English translation, we will concern ourselves with the most significant and modern scholarship, which was all written in English.

The first work of note in recent times is Avery Dulles' essay *Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition*, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Prize Essay for 1940, because Dulles seriously challenges the prevailing trends in Pico research, declaring Pico to be a medieval scholastic and to have drawn most upon that tradition for his inspiration and ideas. This is very important because Dulles supports his arguments mainly by examining Pico's sources and the manner in which he applies them in his work. While Dulles intended to "record the main lines of his philosophy as he saw them himself" and not to "[single] out those aspects of his philosophy which divide him from his predecessors or attach him to his successors," (Dulles 10) his analysis seems less than objective and lacks nuance in appreciating the many strands of thought with which Pico dealt. This is not a unique issue for scholars studying Pico and his works.

Charles Trinkaus' *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (1970), brings Pico's metaphysical and Cabalistic tendencies back into focus. Trinkaus interprets Pico's ideas about humanity in the *Oration* through the lens of Pico's *Heptaplus*, commentary on *Genesis I*, and concludes that "Pico's vision of man has far more in common with the mythological-poetic tradition and with Hebrew, pagan and Christian mysticism than it does with the *vita active et operosa* of the Renaissance ... Again I say Pico's is a poetic vision." (Trinkhaus 521) Finally, in his conclusion, Trinkaus notes that the ideas which underlay the Renaissance - human dignity, freedom, and intellectual learning - were the same that influenced the Reformation.

The next major scholar to consider is William G. Craven and his *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Symbol of his Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher* (1981). Craven is also of the opinion that previous scholars may be in error, but importantly, he identifies this as a trend.

“Such an examination ... reveals a wide and sometimes startling disparity between most historical accounts of his thought and the texts on which they are supposedly based... meanings and intentions have been attributed to Pico which the texts will not sustain and sometimes clearly exclude. This constitutes a historiographical phenomenon of considerable interest, one deserving attention in its own right. These misinterpretations and misattributions are so prevalent and so consistent as to demand an explanation. In broad terms the answer seems to be that historians have found in Pico what they expected to find. As a symbol or representative of his age, he is expected to exhibit Renaissance characteristics. He wrote in praise of man, so he must have been proposing a new anthropology in radical contrast to medieval views. He was a religious thinker who fell foul of the Church, so his doctrines must have been subversive of medieval Catholic dogma. Even if he himself was not quite a Pelagian or a pantheist, a gnostic or a deist, then he must at least have foreshadowed one or more, or show tendencies toward them. He wrote of human freedom and attacked astrology, so he must have been vindicating man’s freedom from external determination, and the autonomy of the human spirit. With these expectations in mind, historians have searched the texts for confirmation, and likely passages have been lifted out of context and pressed into service. The result has been a quite mythical picture of Pico, which has obscured his real concerns and intentions.” (Craven 4)

Craven ultimately argues that Pico must be interpreted in light of his own words and intentions, not be cast by historians into a more restrictive role. (Craven 162)

It would be almost 30 years until the next major breakthrough in Pico studies came in the form of S. A. Farmer’s epic tome *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486) - The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (1998). This study of the *900 Theses* has to be considered the epitome of scholarship on Pico. Farmer spent years in Florence researching this dissertation which is a complete English translation of the *900 Theses* along with Farmer’s introductions and commentaries. Through this expert analysis and translation, the subject of the *Oration* and Pico’s planned disputation at the Vatican was revealed again to the world. Farmer focuses on the syncretic nature of Pico’s philosophy and diagnoses the methods by which Pico achieved this remarkable feat. Beyond that, Farmer’s book is a treasure trove that contains analysis on every pertinent aspect of Pico’s works including esoteric and mystical interpretations, exegetical methodologies, reconciling Plato and Aristotle, analysis of natural magic and its precise definition, all the political machinations within which Pico was inevitably caught, Pico’s involvement with Savonarola,

anti-Pico polemics, and even addresses the question of Pico's assassination. It would be virtually impossible to overvalue this monumental addition to the understanding of Pico and his work.

Brian Copenhaver's article entitled "The Secret of Pico's Oration: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy" is perhaps the most brilliant analysis of Pico's Cabalistic influences in the *Oration* and is one of the few scholarly works that delves into Pico's sources to elucidate the hidden esoteric messages that Pico implanted in the *Oration*. For example, Copenhaver writes about Pico's use of language in describing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – metaphorically placing the Hebrew patriarchs in different spheres of the Tree of Life. But this would only be decipherable to readers with prior Cabalistic knowledge. (Copenhaver 68-9) This article is crucial to Pico scholarship because it goes beyond accepting Pico's word that the Cabala contains the most sublime metaphysics and demonstrates the hidden aspects of this influence are pervasive within at least one of Pico's works, supporting the idea that this would be the case in Pico's other writings.

Crofton Black's *Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (2006) is a crucial study of *Heptaplus*, Pico's commentary on the creation narrative of *Genesis I*. Black focuses on Pico's esoteric hermeneutics, comparable to Cabalistic exegesis, and allegorical theory of intellectual ascent. This is important because Black identifies ideas about the intellect as being crucial to the interpretation and that the Cabala fundamentally affected Pico's philosophy. Again, with additional evidence that Pico had demonstrated both overt and covert use of Cabala in his *Heptaplus*, as Black does, it is logical to expect that he would have done so in his other works, specifically in the *900 Theses*.

*Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498* by Amos Edelheit, published in 2008, provides a view of Pico's life and work through the lens of the spiritual and political crisis in Florence. This crisis centered around "authority in the Dominican Order on the question of the reform, and on the nature of religious life towards much broader spiritual, political, and cultural dimension." (Edelheit 1) Edelheit argues that Pico's development of his Humanist philosophy was predicated upon what he perceived as differing opinions of the Church Fathers and Doctors on theological questions and other issues. (Edelheit *Ficino* 282-3) This work is important because it demonstrates that scholars are still able to focus on specific aspects of Pico's life and work and come away with a detailed

analysis that is in no way comprehensive. Nevertheless, Edelheit demonstrates that the circumstances and context that prompted Pico to question, seek, and formulate philosophy were instability, confusion, and lack of clarity about theological questions within the community.

*Pico della Mirandola: New Essays* (2008) edited by M. V. Dougherty features nine articles on various aspects of Pico's work. Each article is worthwhile and contributes to the modern scholarship on Pico by allowing the reader to see the variety, nuance, breadth, and depth of Pico's philosophical wanderings. It would be difficult to encapsulate the book without summarizing each article, but suffice it to say that Dougherty's collection continues the fine tradition of Pico scholarship and expands our understanding of the subject.

The second area of scholarship that impacts this research project is the relatively new and evolving study of western esotericism, and more specifically, the phenomenon of Christian Cabalism – of which Pico is the first public exemplar. Pico and his devotion to the Cabala has come into sharper focus recently as scholars grapple with trying to understand the transition of a Jewish esoteric tradition into Christianity during a time of extreme religious intolerance.

“Christian Kabbalah is, prima facie, an enigma. Until the end of the fifteenth century, Jewish Kabbalah was considered by Jews themselves to be an esoteric lore; conceived to be the core of Judaism, it was to be transmitted only to a few initiates both in manuscripts and orally. Yet it seems that in a very short time this closely guarded, peculiarly Jewish religious tradition found a place in Christian religious thought.” (Idel 228-229)

The adoption of the Jewish tradition by Christians is an intriguing and unusual occurrence in the history of religion. The context in which it occurred was one of “appropriation and supersession” as stated previously, indicating that the allure of this tradition was perhaps too tempting for esoterically inclined Christian philosophers to resist at that time. Initially, the scholarship on this subject was from a Jewish perspective where the scholars addressed the Christian Cabala as an extension of the Jewish tradition, as well as an interaction between Jews and Christians. Gershom Scholem's *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* in 1941 was the first work in this area, and *Origins of the Kabbalah* was first published in 1962. Scholem is recognized as the preeminent scholar of the Kabbalah and a study of the Christian adaptation of this tradition must include consideration of his works because all scholars in this area consider his opinion the

most influential in the field. Scholem's work allows readers to understand the philosophical influences upon the tradition, which include Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. This is crucial because it forms the foundation of later scholars' argument that the basis of the adaptation of the Cabala by Christians was specifically due to the recognition of familiar gnostic and Neoplatonic influences on Jewish esotericism.

The scholarship on the Christian Cabala began with Joseph Blau's *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (1944), but his work has been criticized by other scholars because it "did not address how Kabbalah was transposed into a Christian idiom, and how Christians came to accept such a peculiarly Jewish type of lore." (Idel 229) However, Blau's book is still important because of his early analysis of the work of Pico della Mirandola, who was the first to publicly proclaim that the Cabala provided proof of the veracity of the Christian faith.

Another major milestone in the study of the Cabala was written by Scholem's student Chaim Wirszubski and entitled *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (1989). This study is crucial to the subject because "Wirszubski described in great detail the penetration of kabbalistic texts and concepts into the milieu of Christian Florentine intellectuals. He traced the precise Hebrew sources of most of Pico's kabbalistic discussions and showed what happened to the original texts when they were transferred into a Christian milieu." (Idel 229) This type of detailed scholarship is invaluable to apprehending precisely how Jewish esotericism was translated into a Christian paradigm. Wirszubski's work has been criticized recently by Giulio Busi and Kocku von Stuckrad, both scholars of western esotericism, as being inaccurate based on incomplete bibliographic material that was available at the time. In fact, Busi has begun publishing translations of some of the primary source material from Pico's library, including *The Great Parchment* - a Kabbalistic scroll that was a self-contained esoteric creation story with all the associated biblical verses and metaphysical diagrams. The text is basically a retelling of the biblical tales but organized by Sephirot, spheres on the Tree of Life corresponding to various divine qualities, and each story is illustrative of that aspect. This text is just a single example of how Pico had access to a larger corpus of original Cabalistic texts than just about anyone else at that place and time, providing a glimpse into the depth of Pico's learning on the subject.

Moshe Idel is another major scholar of the history of the Cabala. Idel's book, *The Kabbalah in Italy, 1280 - 1510: A Survey* (2011), aside from being fairly recent, is crucial because of his inclusion of a chapter in the book entitled "Jewish Kabbalah in Christian Garb" which discusses not only the phenomenon of the Christian Cabala in Italy, its birthplace, but also surveys much of the available scholarship on the subject. Although brief, Idel's analysis touches all major components of the study of Christian Cabala including religious tension and conversion, overemphasis on Jewish exegetical devices, Neoplatonic and gnostic influences, theurgical practices developed by Christians, and wider dissemination.

By engaging with the approaches of history of religion, western esotericism, and those of other scholars, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the spread of the Cabala into Christendom. Pico was at the forefront of this movement, and by considering the work of all these scholars, some hostile to the notion, a clearer image of this philosopher emerges as a brilliant mind that was captivated by an esoteric system which emphasized intelligence as much as he did.

### **Research Methods and Limitations**

Researching Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, his angelology, path of ascension, views on intelligence, and syncretic philosophy is a demanding undertaking. Fortunately, a great wealth of scholarship exists on this subject in English. It is also modern and a thriving area of study. All of the primary source texts are available in multiple English translations, including the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, *900 Theses*, *Apologia*, *Heptaplus*, and *On Being and the One*. All of the secondary sources and commentaries are readily available in print or electronic format.

However, being unable to read Latin or Italian means most of the older Pico scholarship is not accessible. This limitation is ameliorated significantly because of the work of more modern historians in detailing the arguments of earlier scholars. Consequently, the ongoing scholarly conversation about Pico and his work is uninterrupted despite the length of time and leaps of language that this work has taken. If anything, limiting the huge amount of material on the subject should be viewed as beneficial, otherwise the research phase alone would take years.



## **Tentative Schedule**

Proposal submission – Wednesday, May 25, 2016

Anticipated date of proposal approval – Wednesday, May 25, 2016

Completed thesis submission – Friday, February 24, 2017

Graduation – May 2017

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