

# The Kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique, and the Integral Yoga. A Study in Cross-Cultural Influence

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## Abstract

Certaines traditions ésotériques de l'Occident revendiquent des origines orientales. Moins nombreuses sont les traditions ésotériques de l'Orient ayant été influencées par une tradition occidentale. La « philosophie cosmique » de Max Théon (?1848–1927) doit certains de ses éléments à la kabbale de l'école d'Isaac Luria (1534–1572). En 1914, Mirra Alfassa (1878–1973), qui avait fait partie de l'entourage de Théon, se rendit en Inde et rencontra Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950). On trouve dans le « yoga intégral » d'Aurobindo, basé principalement sur les Upanishad, plusieurs idées qui rappellent celles de la philosophie cosmique, et d'autres qui évoquent les doctrines de l'école de Luria. Comment expliquer ces ressemblances? Par Mirra Alfassa, Aurobindo eut connaissance de plusieurs termes et concepts « cosmiques », dont certains avaient probablement des antécédents kabbalistiques. Mais d'autres ressemblances ne peuvent s'expliquer ainsi. Il faut alors leur attribuer une origine indépendante.

## Keywords

Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose); Mirra Alfassa; Max Theon; philosophie cosmique; kabbalah; yoga

## 1. Introduction

Many forms of Western Esotericism claim Eastern roots or influence. Some of these claims have little historical basis, as in the “pseudo-Egyptianism” of seventeenth-century Hermetic writers such as Robert Fludd, Michael Maier, and Athanasius Kircher.<sup>1</sup> In other instances the Oriental influence is well

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<sup>1</sup> Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 117, 289. For Renaissance Egyptomania in general, see Dijkstra, ‘Mysteries of the Nile’, 59–61.

attested, as in the Sabbatean reinterpretation of the kabbalah by Sabbatai Zevi and Nathan of Gaza during the seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky drew on Egyptian, Indian and other sources in writing the primary texts of the Theosophical Society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Cases in which the influence flowed in the other direction, that is, in which a form of Western esotericism had some impact on an Eastern occult or spiritual teaching, are more rare. I leave out of consideration modern reinterpretations of Indian, Islamic or Chinese teachings by Western exegetes and practitioners. Such reinterpretations are legion; they began with the European discovery of Oriental knowledge in the eighteenth century and continue to this day.<sup>3</sup> Much less common are cases in which the formulator of a significant Eastern teaching was directly or indirectly influenced by Western esoteric ideas or practices. The case I study in this paper may be the only one in which ideas with a kabbalistic pedigree left some trace on the writings of a notable Indian spiritual teacher. Whether this trace can rightly be characterized as influence depends on how the term influence is understood, and I will look into this question in the concluding section of the paper.

The Indian figure whose teachings I will examine is Sri Aurobindo (birth name Aurobindo Ghose, 1872–1950). Best known today as a spiritual leader with a large following, Aurobindo is also remembered as a revolutionary politician, a poet, and a philosopher. Born in Calcutta, he was sent to England at the age of seven, and received a solid classical education at St. Paul's School, London, and King's College, Cambridge. Returning to India in 1893, he immersed himself in the Indian cultural tradition, reading the classics of Sanskrit literature and later the foundational texts of Hinduism: the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Rig Veda*. He wrote later that his own philosophy 'was formed first by the study of the Upanishads and the Gita', but insisted that the primary source of his ideas was personal spiritual experience, accompanied by 'knowledge that flowed from above when I sat in meditation'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>) Scholem, *Major Trends*, 287–324.

<sup>3</sup>) In recent years, many critiques of such reinterpretations have been published. See, for example, David Gordon White's studies of Tantrism, notably *Kiss of the Yogini*; Joseph S. Alter's works on yoga, notably *Yoga in Modern India*; and Donald J. Lopez's reconsiderations of Tibetan Buddhism, notably *Buddhism and Science*.

<sup>4</sup>) Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes*, 113.

Whatever its source, Aurobindo's knowledge definitely went beyond things found in Indian texts. The most obvious example of this is his knowledge of the theory of evolution. His own concept of spiritual evolution, a central part of his philosophy, cannot be traced to any Indian source. He at times suggested that the idea of evolution had been adumbrated in certain texts of the Sankhya and Tantric traditions, but he also acknowledged the European origin of the modern theory. As a classical scholar, he had little knowledge of modern science, but he did not have to read *The Origin of Species* to be exposed to the idea of evolution in England during the 1880s and 1890s.

There are other concepts in Aurobindo's philosophy that have no clear equivalents in the Indian tradition. Some of them—the importance of the individual, for example—can be traced back to his English education. Others seem like glacial erratics that have been deposited in the field of his thought from remote sources. In what follows I will show that some such ideas may have come to him from Lurianic kabbalah by way of the *Mouvement Cosmique*, an early-twentieth-century esoteric group based in France and Algeria. The link between Aurobindo and this group was Mirra Alfassa (1878–1973), a Frenchwoman of Sephardic Jewish extraction who met him in India in 1914 and later became his chief collaborator.

## 2. The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor

Mirra Alfassa was an active member of the *Mouvement Cosmique* from around 1904 to 1908. During this period she came into close contact with the leader of the movement, Max Theon (birth name Louis Maxmillian Bimstein, (?1848–1927), and his wife, an Englishwoman whose name at birth was probably Mary Chrystine Woodroffe Ware (?1843–1908). These two had met in England around 1884 when both were significant figures in the British esoteric scene, Woodroffe Ware as the founder of the Universal Philosophic Society, Theon as one of the founders of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, generally referred to as the H.B. of L. Since the H.B. of L. can be viewed retrospectively as a predecessor of the *Mouvement Cosmique*, and because the H.B. of L., now little known, is of some interest in the history of esotericism in late-nineteenth-century England, I will briefly survey its development and teachings before going on to the *Mouvement Cosmique*, Alfassa, and Aurobindo.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of great interest in various forms of esoteric practice and lore in Europe and the United States. The modern spiritualist movement may be said to have begun with the table-rapping heard in Hydesville, New York, in 1848. In the years that followed,

people from all walks of life tried their hand at spirit-communication. Many went to séances for an evening's amusement, but others were serious seekers of truths that had till then been regarded as the prerogative of religion. Dozens of groups were formed that claimed to be modern representatives of ancient and mediaeval esoteric traditions: Egyptian, kabbalistic, Hermetic, Masonic, Rosicrucian, Indian. The most successful of these was the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875. Its leading figure, H.P. Blavatsky, disdained commerce with spirits, claiming instead to be in touch with *mahatmas* or Adepts who directed the spiritual evolution of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

In 1884 a hitherto unknown occult society announced its existence in England: the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. Neophytes learned that the group was only apparently new. In a letter of 1887, one of the group's founders, Peter Davidson (1837–1915), revealed that its inner circle had been 'formed into a distinct and Hermetic order in consequence of a division that took place in the ranks of the Hermetic Initiates 4320 years prior to the year 1881 of our present era'.<sup>6</sup> More historically, the H.B. of L. was presented as an outgrowth of the Brotherhood of Luxor, a group mentioned by Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled* (1877).<sup>7</sup> This was disputed by the Theosophists, one of whom wrote that 'the gudgeon-trap called "The H.B. of L."' had simply 'pilfered' the name'.<sup>8</sup>

The H.B. of L. presented itself as an order of practical occultism. Its use of mystical techniques to open the way to inner experience was something of a novelty at the time. Most esoteric groups, including the Theosophical Society, were content simply to disseminate secret doctrines. The practical techniques of the H.B. of L. consisted mainly of rituals of sacred sexuality and the use of "magic mirrors". It is not known how effective these techniques were, but the popularity of the practical approach encouraged the Theosophical Society to open its own "esoteric section" in 1888. By that time the H.B. of L. had ceased to operate in England. It transpired in 1886 that one of its founders, a man who called himself Thomas Burgoyne (birth name Thomas Henry Dalton, 1855–1894) had been convicted of advertising fraud in Leeds.<sup>9</sup> Threatened with exposure, Burgoyne and Davidson left for the United States, where they kept the H.B. of L. and related groups afloat for several years.

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<sup>5</sup>) Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, 187–332.

<sup>6</sup>) Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 93.

<sup>7</sup>) Passage reproduced and discussed in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 292.

<sup>8</sup>) H. Olcott, *The Theosophist*, August 1892, quoted in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 289.

<sup>9</sup>) Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 343–356, 436.

The third founding member of the H.B. of L. left England for France before Burgoyne and Davidson left for America. This was Theon, the group's primary instructor in practical occultism. If one is to go by his marriage certificate,<sup>10</sup> Theon's real name was Louis Maxmillian Bimstein, his father's name Judes Lion Bimstein, and his father's profession rabbi. The same document gives his age in 1884 as thirty; other documents would make him six or seven years older. All accounts agree that he came from Poland, Russia or the Ukraine and that he was of Jewish origin. It is generally assumed that he was exposed to the kabbalah or a form of Hasidism influenced by the kabbalah during his youth. This is not implausible. Poland became a centre of kabbalistic study in the late sixteenth century and remained one until well into the nineteenth.<sup>11</sup> Hasidism rose in the same region in the eighteenth century and flourished there until the Holocaust.

Theon left eastern Europe sometime around 1870, settling first in Paris and then in London. Little is known of his early activities. A cryptic account written by Davidson says: 'In 1870 (and not 1884, as the January number of the *Theosophist* says), an adept of the serene, ever-existent and ancient Order of the original H.B. of L. ... resolved to choose a neophyte in Great Britain who would answer to his intentions'. In 1873 the 'adept' found the man he was looking for, 'and after having truly tested him and had the authenticity of his credentials verified, he gradually instructed the neophyte'.<sup>12</sup> Joscelyn Godwin, Christian Chancel and John P. Deveney, the historians of the H.B. of L., argue that the neophyte in question was Theon. It certainly was to him that aspirants were directed to write when the H.B. of L. first advertised itself in 1884:

Students of the Occult Science, searchers after truth and Theosophists who may have been disappointed in their expectations of sublime wisdom being freely dispensed by HINDOO MAHATMAS ... can be admitted, after a short probationary term, as members of an Occult Brotherhood, who do not boast of their knowledge and attainments, but teach freely and without reserve all they find worthy to receive.

N.B. All communications should be addressed 'Theosi' [corrected by a printed errata slip to THEON] c/o Robt. H. Gryar, Bath.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Reproduced in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 294.

<sup>11</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 79, 82, 238, 340.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, quoted in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 95.

<sup>13</sup> Advertisement in *The Divine Pyramider*, 1884, reproduced in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 306.

Just before the launch of the H.B. of L., Theon married the woman who later would become the guiding light of the Mouvement Cosmique. Her name, going again by the marriage certificate, was Mary Chrystine Woodroffe Ware.<sup>14</sup> At this time she was lecturing under the name of Una, which, as readers of Spenser will recall, is the name of the heroine of the first book of the *Faerie Queene*. (In the poem Una, “One”, symbolises Truth.) Una was the founder of the Universal Philosophic Society, whose purpose, as she wrote in the group’s prospectus, was ‘to create or form a TEMPLE OF TRUTH in which Science as the High Priest shall offer to humanity the three-fold gifts of happiness, Holiness and Freedom’. The prospectus sets forth three objects, seven laws, and nine primary axioms. The seventh axiom, ‘That man is ever evolving and that the comprehension of electricity and its great collaborateur magnetism marks a most important epoch in his evolution’,<sup>15</sup> shows the Society’s kinship with other late-nineteenth-century organisations attempting to harmonise science and spirituality. Also in 1884, the *Sayings of the Sibyl Alta Una*, by Una, High Priestess of Pan, the Light God and Eros, was brought out. Its style, in contrast to that of the other pamphlet, was not philosophical or scientific but mantic: ‘Nine times I have lived upon the earth (consciously) that I might attract, concentrate, and diffuse Life, Light and Love, the life of Pan, the Light of the Light King and the Love of Eros the immortal’.<sup>16</sup> Una kept something of this tone even while addressing the Universal Philosophic Society, appealing, as a contemporary observer wrote, ‘to inspired intuition—no trace of dry and harsh ratiocination’.<sup>17</sup>

Shortly after her marriage, Una stopped addressing meetings and began to appear with Theon at séances. He was active in the H.B. of L. and also advertised himself as a healer.<sup>18</sup> During its brief moment in the sun (1884–1886), the H.B. of L. was regarded by some as a serious rival of the Theosophical Society. The revelation of Burgoyne’s criminal past enabled the Theosophists to dismiss

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<sup>14</sup> Her death certificate gives her name as ‘Miriam Lin Woodroff, femme de Max Théon’. Writers of secondary sources often refer to her as Alma Theon. Alma was a pseudonym given to her in a book written by the wife of Louis Thémanlys, Theon’s disciple and successor, and there is no evidence she ever used it. I discuss this point in Heehs, *Lives*, 446.

<sup>15</sup> Una, *Objects, Axioms, Laws*, 1–6.

<sup>16</sup> Una, *Sayings*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Claire Thémanlys, quoted in Chanel, *Théon*, 221.

<sup>18</sup> A classified advertisement in *The Medium and Daybreak*, 3 July 1885 (reproduced in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 296) begins: ‘THEON, THE EASTERN PSYCHIC HEALER, cures all diseases ....’

the H.B. of L. as a ‘catchpenny affair, promoted by disreputable persons for private gain’.<sup>19</sup> By crossing the Channel before the Burgoyne scandal became news, Theon avoided being tarred by the brush that was used on his erstwhile colleagues.

If this was all that was known about Theon and his wife, there would be little to distinguish them from the dozens of mediums, psychics, healers, and mountebanks whose advertisements filled the pages of the psychic and occult journals of the period. But the teachings the two of them developed after the demise of the H.B. of L. had a depth and sophistication far surpassing those of the earlier group, and these teachings had an influence that is still felt a century later.

### 3. Le Mouvement Cosmique

After remaining in France for a year and a half, Theon and his wife went to Algeria and settled in the town of Tlemcen. Here, in a villa at the foot of the Atlas mountains, they spent a decade developing their teachings. Mme Theon wrote ceaselessly, giving expression to a personal mythology that would constitute the bulk of the couple’s literary output. Theon remained in touch with the European esoteric scene and occasionally published an article in French journals. His most important correspondent was F.-Ch. Barlet (birth name Albert Fauchaux, 1838–1921), a significant figure in the French occult revival. Barlet was a founder-member of the Paris branch of the Theosophical Society, and is also regarded as ‘the father of the modern astrological movement in France’.<sup>20</sup> An early member and supporter of the H.B. of L., Barlet retained his admiration for the organisation’s instructor in practical occultism even after its dissolution. In 1900 Barlet paid a visit to the Theons in Tlemcen; the next year, in Paris, he launched *La revue cosmique* in order to bring about the philosophical synthesis he long had dreamed of. The main contributors to this journal were Theon and his wife.<sup>21</sup>

The Philosophie Cosmique was elaborated over more than a decade in *La revue cosmique*, another periodical called *La tradition cosmique*, and various subsidiary publications. Any attempt to summarise the teachings in a few paragraphs is bound to be inadequate. An added difficulty is that the texts

<sup>19</sup> *The Theosophist*, June 1886, reproduced in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 356.

<sup>20</sup> Ellic Howe, quoted in Chanel, *Théon*, 301.

<sup>21</sup> Chanel, *Théon*, 291–302, 409; Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 31, 381, 431.

of the movement are forbidding to the non-initiate. A reviewer in the *Mercur de France* commented in 1907 that the group's teachings were 'set forth in an obscure language, bristling with barbarisms like *sentientation*, *respension*, *pathotisme*, whose coinage was unnecessary as proper French equivalents almost always exist'.<sup>22</sup> A half-century later, a scholar noted that the teachings of *La tradition cosmique* were 'written in such a bizarre manner that even the most cultivated men (unless of course they were themselves "Cosmic") quickly abandoned the attempt to read them'.<sup>23</sup> I have relied on other primary texts to get at the main points of doctrine. The 'Base de la Philosophie Cosmique', an official publication of the movement, sums up the teachings in eighteen axioms. I translate those germane to the present discussion, allowing most neologisms to stand untranslated:

- I. The Causeless Cause alone has no form and consequently is above our conceptions. It is the Unthinkable.
- II. The Formateurs of all states and all worlds, along with their inhabitants, are the work of the Procédants, of the Attributes, of their Emanations, and of their Formations ....
- IV. In the Physical State, man is the supreme Evolver [*Evoluteur*] ....
- IX. All manifestation of the Unformed [*l'Informal*] is dual .... Duality of being or the *pathétique* union of the active and passive is therefore essential for any evolution towards perfection.
- XIV. Life is sacred, because life is the means for the *individualisation* of intelligence ....
- XVII. There are four classifications of terrestrial Formations: mineral, vegetable, animal and psycho-intellectual or divine-human; among these four there is no division in the order.<sup>24</sup>

These six axioms give the gist of the cosmology of the Philosophie Cosmique. It is elaborated most clearly in the *Principes généraux de la philosophie cosmique*, a 41-page booklet published in 1907. I summarize the main points of doctrine here:

There is a Cause, which people visualise as an anthropomorphic God, creating out of nothing. This is absurd. In fact the Causeless Cause [*la Cause sans cause*] is beyond all conception. We see only the manifested forces. These

<sup>22</sup>) 'Revue de la quinzaine', 139.

<sup>23</sup>) Monestier, *Les Sociétés secrètes féminines*, 89.

<sup>24</sup>) 'Base de la philosophie cosmique', 1–3.



act on Integral Substance to “form” (not “create”) beings and worlds. Substance is not inert matter. Universal life animates everything from the crystal to the most ineffable manifestation of the Unthinkable.<sup>25</sup>

Force and matter are one. The Cosmos is the vestment of the Unthinkable. The first result of the equality of Integral Substance and the manifested forces is the Cosmic Equilibrium. For this to be, Integral Substance must be able to receive the manifested forces and respond to them. If it cannot, there results disequilibrium, which is the principle of division, and dissolution, which is the principle of death and the source of evil.<sup>26</sup>

The manifested forces of the Unthinkable cannot act directly on Integral Substance. Certain intermediaries are needed: the Formateurs, who produce the world as we know it. There is no creation, only formation. The Formateur of our world, according to the Tradition, is called the Elohim, who acts through a subordinate Formation, the first Man. As the manifested forces, which bring about cosmic Equilibrium, act through the Formateurs, so disequilibrium has its agents: the Grand Hostile and the Hostiles. These agents of division are the enemies of Man. The story of Man’s struggle against them is told in the narratives of the Tradition, for instance *Genesis*. The so-called fall of man will be followed by his triumph: his reascension, by means of evolution, to integral Immortality. This is the goal: the Restitution of Man to his full rights and power.<sup>27</sup>

Following the example of the founders of the H.B. of L. (and of many other spiritual teachers across the ages), the Theons did not put forward the Philosophie Cosmique as something novel. ‘Yet another new philosophy?’ opens the *Principes généraux*. ‘Certainly not. It is as old as the World’. In fact:

It is the original Tradition of Humanity, the pure source, from which all religions, all philosophies, have borrowed the light that they reflect—after altering it more or less, the better to adapt it to their interests or conceptions. It is the universal Tradition, of all times and all worlds. Therefore is it called *Cosmic*.<sup>28</sup>

Despite this claim, the pedigree of the Philosophie Cosmique can be traced with some accuracy. It owes a great deal to Una. Several of its *Axioms* echo the “Nine Primary Axioms” of her Universal Philosophic Society, and the personal

<sup>25</sup> *Principes généraux*, 7–9.

<sup>26</sup> *Principes généraux*, 10–11.

<sup>27</sup> *Principes généraux*, 12–16. Gender-specific language as in the original.

<sup>28</sup> *Principes généraux*, 5.

mythology of the *Tradition Cosmique* was foreshadowed by the *Sayings of the Sibyl Alta Una*. Theon's stamp, equally clear, was highlighted by Barlet, who regarded the Mouvement Cosmique as the direct successor of the H.B. of L. He wrote in 1908 that the early group, had 'ceased in order to pass on the succession to another perfectly vital form'.<sup>29</sup> But it was another sort of influence that struck most of Theon's contemporaries. The *Mercure de France* reviewer already cited wrote in 1907 that, as far as he could determine, Theon's mission was

to reveal to the world the teachings of the oral tradition, lost for Occidentals, of the kabbalah in its original purity, that is to say, freed from of the errors and the childish, profane stories contained in the *Zohar*, restored at last to its integrality and true original meaning.<sup>30</sup>

Others who noticed this ancestry were more troubled by it. A critic in *Nouveaux horizons de la science et de la pensée* spoke of the *Tradition cosmique* as a 'mélange of oriental systems coloured by Judaism'.<sup>31</sup> Barlet himself wrote to the Theons in 1902 that a doctrine 'whose intimate affinity with Judaism was evident', combined with the *Revue's* apparently anti-Christian tone, would be enough to get the movement suppressed.<sup>32</sup> His fears were not without basis. In 1902 the hysteria surrounding the Dreyfus affair was still intense. Barlet ultimately broke with Theon over this issue, and Theon became editor of the *Revue*.

I summarise the subsequent history of the Mouvement Cosmique very briefly with special reference to developments related to the subject of this paper. After Barlet's departure, Louis Thémanlys (birth name Louis Moyse, 1874–1943) became head of the Paris centre. In 1904 or 1905 Thémanlys was introduced to Mirra Alfassa, the sister of one of his friends. Of Jewish descent but unreligious,<sup>33</sup> Alfassa had a strong turn towards the spiritual life, and responded immediately to what Thémanlys told her about the Theons' teachings. She soon became involved in the movement's activities, participating in a discussion group and helping to edit the *Revue*. She may have met Theon in France in 1905, and she certainly made two voyages to Algeria to be with him

<sup>29</sup> Barlet in *L'étoile de l'Orient*, 24 March 1908, quoted in English in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> "Revue de la quinzaine", 139.

<sup>31</sup> F. Jollivet-Castelot (1914), quoted in Chanel, *Théon*, 658.

<sup>32</sup> Letter, Barlet to Theon and Mme Theon, quoted in Chanel, *Théon*, 428.

<sup>33</sup> Heehs, *Lives*, 250, 445–446.

and his wife in 1906 and 1907; but sometime in 1908 she left the movement. In September of the same year, Mme Theon died unexpectedly while on a trip to Europe. Theon lapsed into depression and lost interest in the movement. The last issue of the *Revue* appeared at the end of 1908. Theon returned to Tlemcen, where he died in 1927. Even during his lifetime, the direction of the Mouvement Cosmique passed into the hands of Louis Thémanlys, who for a short time published a sequel to the *Revue* entitled *Le mouvement cosmique*. Louis's son Pascal, who succeeded him, emigrated to Jerusalem in 1953. Here he created a small centre that is still active.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Theon and the Hebraic Tradition

Theon never denied his Jewish roots; neither did he go out of his way to expose them. According to a story current even during his lifetime, he was chosen by an Eastern (kabbalistic? Hasidic?) master to transmit the Tradition to Western aspirants in a way appropriate to the place and time.<sup>35</sup> Hence he avoided casting his teachings in an explicitly kabbalistic form. For this or for other reasons, the *Revue* contains few allusions to the kabbalah, though Hebrew terminology and themes (“Elohim”, the legends of *Genesis*) are not uncommon.

This lack of an explicit Hebraic base is consistent with the founders' claim that the Philosophie Cosmique predated any historic tradition, but was, quite simply, the original esoteric tradition of humanity. The two traditions thought by occultists of that period to be the oldest and most remarkable, the “Aryan” and the “Chaldean”, were said by the Theons to be early deformations of the original tradition. They nevertheless conceded that they had ‘borrowed above all from the oral Chaldean tradition’.<sup>36</sup> This was an indirect way of saying that they borrowed primarily from the Hebraic tradition, in particular the kabbalah.

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<sup>34</sup>) In 1995 I met Pascal Thémanlys in Jerusalem and sat with a small circle associated with him there. Thémanlys died in 2000. At present the Argaman Center of Jerusalem publishes and distributes books by and about Theon (<http://abpw.net/cosmique/livres/listeang.htm>). In October 2010 I sent an email to their address asking for information about current activities, but did not receive a reply.

<sup>35</sup>) “Revue de la quinzaine”, 139; Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 11.

<sup>36</sup>) *Revue cosmique* 7: 3, 182. Properly speaking, the term “Chaldean” refers to a Semitic people who settled in the southern part of Babylonia in ancient times. Later it was used for Babylonians in general. It has long had associations with astrology and magic, such as that practised by the Babylonian mages. The Jews are said by some to have encountered this lore during the Babylonian captivity and to have incorporated it into their own mystical

Kabbalah, “what is received”, “tradition”, comprises the texts and practices of esoteric Jewish mysticism. Enormously influential in the Hebraic world, it has also been important in Christian esoteric circles since the sixteenth century. Traced back by some as far as the Bible itself, the kabbalah as we know it had its first flowering in Provence and Spain in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was at this time that the *Zohar*, the most important kabbalistic text, was written. After the Spanish expulsion (1492), the kabbalah was disseminated throughout the Jewish world. From the latter part of the sixteenth century, the school associated with the name of the Palestinian Isaac Luria (1534–1572) became the dominant form. Lurianic kabbalah soon reached Poland, which became an important centre of its cultivation. Popular movements active in the region in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the Shabbetian and Frankist heresies and Hasidism—all contain elements of Lurianic kabbalah.<sup>37</sup> So does the Philosophie Cosmique.

Before proceeding, I will provide a summary of some important kabbalistic doctrines, touching lightly or even ignoring some of its better known aspects while stressing those that resurfaced later in the Philosophie Cosmique. The central problem of kabbalistic cosmology, indeed of all esoteric cosmology, is the relationship between the One and the Many. The great question is: How does the infinite and perfect create or manifest this finite, imperfect universe? The three most characteristic doctrines of Lurianic kabbalah: *tsim-tsum* (contraction), *shevirat ha-kelim* (the breaking of the vessels), and *tikkun*

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tradition. Nineteenth-century Frenchmen used the word “Chaldean” rather vaguely. French translators of the *Zohar* (written in Aramaic in thirteenth-century Spain) wrote that their versions were rendered “from the Chaldean”. Theon seems to have profited from such imprecision. By saying that the Philosophie Cosmique derived from the Chaldean tradition he gave it a respectable extraction while avoiding a terminology that might have identified him too closely with the Judaic tradition. But the Judaic tradition was certainly his main textual source. Christian Chanel, whose work on Theon is the most extensive scholarly study of the man, writes, in regard to a Cosmique publication: ‘one should understand by the Chaldean tradition the Hebraic tradition’ (Chanel, *Theon*, 630). Theon’s present followers, most of whom live in Israel, speak of him openly as belonging to the Hebraic tradition. A book published in Jerusalem in 1992 refers to him as ‘a great Kabbalist’ who ‘devoted himself to the study and teaching of the *Sefer Bereshith* [The Book of Genesis] and of the precepts given to Noah’ (Introduction to Theon, *Sixth Cosmic Era*, 1). Others view such statements as attempts to give the Mouvement Cosmique and Theon ‘retrospectively a Hasidic [or kabbalistic] origin’ (*H. B. of L.: Textes et documents*, xxix). They certainly make Theon more explicitly kabbalistic than he wished to appear.

<sup>37</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 67–86; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 325.

(restitution), deal with the process of manifestation in more detail than earlier kabbalah did. In brief, the Lurianic account runs as follows.<sup>38</sup> The infinity of God leaves no room for a cosmos. Before God can emanate God's attributes, a contraction or limitation, that yet is not a limitation, must be introduced into God's nature. This is *tsimtsum*. The first being to be emanated in the primal space created by *tsimtsum* is Adam Kadmon, the primeval man. From him radiate the ten *sefirot*, the divine attributes or emanations. With them are associated vessels to hold the radiated light. But the vessels of the lower *sefirot* cannot contain the light; they break open, spilling the light and scattering their shards. These are the source of gross matter. This "breaking of the vessels" (*shevirat ha-kelim*) releases 'the whole complexity of the cosmological drama'.<sup>39</sup> But this drama will have a happy ending. Light issuing from the forehead of Adam Kadmon will restore the confused creation to its original design. This is *tikkun* (restoration, restitution). And because the manifestation has passed through the cosmic process, the restored harmony will be greater than it would otherwise have been. The attainment of *tikkun* is the purpose of creation.

### 5. Kabbalistic Themes in the Philosophie Cosmique

The term *restitution* occurs frequently in the *Revue cosmique*, indeed the journal claimed to be the 'Restitution of the Original Tradition'. In the *Principes généraux*, restitution is explained as follows: When, as a result of the cosmic disequilibrium, Man is deprived of his birthright by the Hostiles, the process of evolution begins. In the course of its progression, the Great Hostile will be defeated and man will be restored to his union with his Divine Origin. 'This will be the dawn of Restitution, the Restitution of Man to his rights and power, the Restitution of the Earth to its splendours and capacities'.<sup>40</sup> This 'Restitution' clearly is the same as *tikkun*, the fable of the breaking of the vessels being replaced by a typically nineteenth-century narrative of evolutionary progress.

Restitution is one of several points of Cosmique doctrine that derive from Lurianic kabbalah. I will examine three others that are especially relevant to the present discussion, numbering them for easy reference.

<sup>38</sup>) Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 128–144; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 265–268.

<sup>39</sup>) Scholem, *Major Trends*, 266.

<sup>40</sup>) *Principes généraux*, 16.

### 5a. *Unity and Duality*

In the kabbalah the original Unity is sometimes imaged as a union of Two. This is expressed by a number of concepts, such as the union of God with his *shekhinah*, the female divine presence, and *du-parzufim*, the ‘double-faceted nature of primeval man’.<sup>41</sup> The Philosophie Cosmique made *dualité d’être* one of its central ideas: ‘All manifestation of the Unthinkable is dual: Force and Substance, action and resistance. It is by the opposition and conjunction of these two poles that all things are manifested’.<sup>42</sup> This is as true of individuals acting on earth as of the cosmic processes of evolution: ‘without human duality, there could not be full *responcion* to the Divine Duality’.<sup>43</sup> The union of complementary male-female couples was a common theme in nineteenth-century occultism. Often, as in the H.B. of L., it was given a sexual turn. The Mouvement Cosmique played down the sexual aspect, but stressed the importance of finding one’s counterpart. More than seventy years after the *Revue* ceased publication, a French follower of the Theons wrote: ‘This [Cosmique] work was done [by Mme Theon] in duality [*en dualité*] with Max Theon, as no mission of this sort can be accomplished properly without this duality of the couple’.<sup>44</sup>

### 5b. *The Human Being, the Soul, and Individuality*

In the *Zohar* and other early kabbalistic texts, ‘man is the perfecting agent of the cosmos’, for man has as his mission to ‘bring about a *tikkun* or restoration of this world’. In early kabbalah, man’s soul is said to be threefold, comprising *nefesh*, the animal soul, *ru’ah*, the spirit, and *neshamah*, the innermost soul. *Neshamah* is like ‘a divine spark in man ... emanated directly from the Godhead’. Lurianic kabbalah speaks of a five-part soul, and also of the *zelem* (image), which is ‘the principle of individuality with which every single human being is endowed’. The *zelem* ‘grows and develops in accordance with the biological processes of its possessor’.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For the *shekhinah*, see Scholem, *Mystical Shape*, 140–196. For *du-parzufim*, see Idel, *New Perspectives*, 128–136.

<sup>42</sup> *Principes généraux*, 27.

<sup>43</sup> *Revue cosmique* II: 12, 762. *Responcion* is a Cosmique coinage meaning something like response or responsiveness.

<sup>44</sup> Fernande Boissay, personal communication to Jayantilal Parekh, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, 15 October 1980.

<sup>45</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 152–158; Scholem (ed.), *Zohar*, 96 (*Zohar* II. 141b).

Similar ideas have an important place in the Philosophie Cosmique. According to the *Principes généraux*, restitution will come about when man (*l'homme*) defeats “the Hostile”, the power of falsehood. After his inevitable triumph, man ‘will become one with his Divine Origin, and will manifest its Light’.<sup>46</sup> The soul of man, which is nothing but ‘the light of our Divine Origin’, can become immortal ‘if we know how to individualize it’. Man has a fourfold constitution, comprising physical, nervous, psychic and mental degrees, each of which has the power to develop itself to such an extent that it becomes individualized. ‘If a man has, during his lifetime, sufficiently developed his psychic and above all his mental individuality, these superior elements continue to live, in other conditions of density, and the human personality survives’.<sup>47</sup>

### 5c. *The Body of Light*

In the Philosophie Cosmique, the final *restitution* will not be complete unless it includes the ‘physical degree’, that is, the body. According to the *Principes*, ‘the real physical body, that which belonged to the first man when he left the hands of his Formateur, had an envelope that was lightweight, elastic, luminous, and resistant. It was the body described in certain documents as the Body of Light [*corps glorieux*]’.<sup>48</sup> The ‘documents’ referred to here were probably kabbalistic. In Lurianic kabbalah, Adam Kadmon, the primordial man, is ‘nothing but a first configuration of the divine light which flows from the essence of the *Ein-sof* into the primeval space of the *Tsimtsum*’.<sup>49</sup> Other Hebraic texts speak of Adam (sometimes also of Eve) as ‘having an outer skin of light’ or wearing ‘garments of light’, and of having been ‘stripped of their garments of glory’ when exiled from Eden.<sup>50</sup>

## 6. The Philosophie Cosmique and the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo

In the first section I spoke briefly of the Indian philosopher and yogi Sri Aurobindo. After completing his education in England, Aurobindo returned to his homeland and found work in Baroda, a state in Western India. Here

<sup>46</sup>) *Principes généraux*, 14–16.

<sup>47</sup>) *Principes généraux*, 23–26. Gender-specific language as in the original.

<sup>48</sup>) *Principes généraux*, 24.

<sup>49</sup>) Scholem, *Major Trends*, 265.

<sup>50</sup>) Graves and Patai, *Hebrew Myths*, 77; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 153; Altman, *Essays*, 1.

he read the Sanskrit literary and religious classics, and began to formulate his own philosophy. His manuscripts of the period bear out in abundant detail the statement, quoted above,<sup>51</sup> that his philosophy was based on the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, and other Indian texts. From the beginning, virtually all the philosophic themes he developed were Vedantic, deriving either from the *Upanishads* or from the tradition that the philosopher Stephen Phillips calls “folk Vedanta”.<sup>52</sup> Aurobindo also affirmed that his philosophy was informed by the knowledge that came to him through inner experience; but as this experience was on Vedantic lines, it may be stated without hesitation that Aurobindo’s philosophy was based on Vedanta. Its other major component was ideas that he acquired during his European education and upbringing, in particular the idea of evolution. Other less important sources could be cited; it is beyond the scope of this paper to survey them all. The task we set for ourselves was to see whether Aurobindo was influenced by the Philosophie Cosmique and, more remotely, by the kabbalah, as a result of his collaboration with Mirra Alfassa. The ground has now been sufficiently well prepared for a discussion of this question.

After leaving the Mouvement Cosmique in 1908, Mirra remained active in the Parisian spiritual-occult milieu. In March 1914 she and her then husband Paul Richard went to India and met Aurobindo. Four months later, they began to publish a philosophical journal called *Arya*. Most of its contents were written by Aurobindo. In February 1915 the Richards were obliged to return to France because of the First World War. Aurobindo continued to publish material in the *Arya* for the next six years. His contributions comprised works on metaphysics, yoga, textual exegesis, sociology, political science, cultural studies, and literary criticism, which later were republished as eight full-length books and several shorter ones. The system of thought presented in these works is known as the Integral Yoga.

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<sup>51</sup>) See footnote 4.

<sup>52</sup>) Vedanta, one of the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy, may be described briefly as the philosophy of the Upanishads. Classical Vedanta is highly technical, deriving from commentaries on the texts written by mediaeval writers. “Folk Vedanta”, according to Phillips, is ‘a tradition of spiritual practice continuous with the authors of the Upanishads, a tradition that has often associated itself with classical Vedanta of one or another stripe but that often has been aloof from mainstream philosophy, expressing itself in poetry, sermons, etc. and in the modern period often becoming eclectic (à la Ramakrishna and Vivekananda)’ (personal communication to author, 1 June 1998). For a more technical discussion, see Phillips, *Philosophy of Brahman*, 2, 66–67, 72–73.



After passing the war years in France and Japan, Mirra and Paul Richard returned to India in 1920. Paul continued on to France; Mirra remained with Aurobindo as one of his disciples. Six years later, Aurobindo announced that she was his spiritual equal, and put her in charge of the ashram that had grown up around him. At this time he gave her the name “the Mother”. As all her works are published under this name or its French equivalent, I will refer to her as the Mother from this point on.

Aurobindo had no knowledge of the *Philosophie Cosmique* before meeting the Mother. What he learned of it came primarily from discussions with her, and these discussions were not academic. There is no evidence that she ever tried to give him a full account of Theon’s thought, and she did not necessarily tell him that a given piece of knowledge that she passed on to him had come to her from Theon or Mme Theon. As is the case with most mystics and occultists, she had little interest in the provenance of the ideas that she accepted as true. It was enough for her if she was able to confirm their truth through her inner vision or experience. It is certain however that she told Aurobindo that certain terms that she used were parts of the Theons’ vocabulary.

If Aurobindo knew little about the *Philosophie Cosmique*, he knew virtually nothing about the kabbalah. Around 1932 an Englishman practising yoga under his guidance sent him a diagram of the ten *sefirot*, asking him whether it corresponded to anything in Aurobindo’s philosophy. Aurobindo gave no indication of recognising the diagram, but he did write an interesting comment about parallels between different systems of spiritual and occult knowledge:

I do not think exact correlations can always be traced between one system of spiritual and occult knowledge and another. All deal with the same material, but there are differences of standpoint, differences of view-range, a divergence in the mental idea of what is seen and experienced, disparate pragmatic purposes and therefore a difference in the paths surveyed, cut out or followed; the systems vary, each constructs its own schema and technique.<sup>53</sup>

Borrowing Aurobindo’s language, one might say that the kabbalah, the *Philosophie Cosmique*, and Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga present some of ‘the same material’ in different ways. There are, as I showed in section 5, many similarities between elements of Lurianic kabbalah and the *Philosophie Cosmique*. There

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<sup>53</sup>) Aurobindo, *Letters*, 249.

are also some similarities between the Philosophie Cosmique and the Integral Yoga, as well as a few similarities between Lurianic kabbalah and the Integral Yoga that are not shared by the Philosophie Cosmique. I will examine these correlations in this section and the next.

The most obvious resemblances between the Philosophie Cosmique and the Integral Yoga are the least significant. The first sentence of the ‘Base de la philosophie cosmique’ (circa 1907) is: ‘Le Mouvement Cosmique est purement philosophique’.<sup>54</sup> The motto of the French edition of the *Arya* (1914) is ‘La revue “Arya” est purement philosophique’. In a similar case of direct borrowing, in 1933 the Mother took the symbol of the Mouvement Cosmique—a hexagram enclosing a square with a lotus floating on water inside—and made it the symbol of Sri Aurobindo. Such similarities are conspicuous but philosophically insignificant. More relevant to the present inquiry are similarities of terminology and concept. I will examine three examples that are related to those I discussed above when looking at links between the kabbalah and the Philosophie Cosmique.

#### 6a. *The Two-in-One*

As noted in section 5a, *dualité d’être*, an important concept in the Philosophie Cosmique, is foreshadowed in Lurianic kabbalah in the idea of God’s union with his *shekhinah*, and in the double-faceted nature of the primeval man, *duparzufim*. In fact the idea of a male-female duality at the root of creation is a recurrent theme in the occult cosmologies of many cultures. In India it is found in Sankhya philosophy as the duality of soul (*purusha*, which is masculine) and nature (*prakriti*, which is feminine). Tantra philosophy speaks of the duality of the Lord (*ishwara*, masculine) and his creative energy (*shakti*, feminine). The androgynous *ardhanarishwara* image in Shaivite iconography gives striking visual form to this idea. Aurobindo referred to all these concepts in his writings, but he sometimes spoke of the idea of the divine Duality or “Two-in-One” in such a way as to suggest not Sankhya or Tantra, but the Philosophie Cosmique. In his epic poem *Savitri* he wrote:

Descend to life with him thy heart desires.  
O Satyavan, O luminous Savitri,  
I sent you forth of old beneath the stars,

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<sup>54</sup>) ‘Base de la philosophie cosmique’, 1.

A dual power of God in an ignorant world,  
 In a hedged creation shut from limitless self,  
 Bringing down God to the insentient globe,  
 Lifting earth-beings to immortality.<sup>55</sup>

Moving from literature to life, Aurobindo felt that he and the Mother were an embodied ‘dual power of God’. In a letter of 1934, he told a disciple: ‘the Mother’s consciousness and mine are the same, the one Divine Consciousness in two, because that is necessary for the play’.<sup>56</sup> This statement and the passage from *Savitri* both contain an idea of individual soul-complementarity that is very similar to the idea of *dualité d’être* in the Philosophie Cosmique.

#### 6b. *The Psychic Being*

Theon once wrote that a human *dualité* becomes dynamic by the ‘infusion of the active psychic being into the passive psychic being’.<sup>57</sup> In Cosmique texts, the term psychic is related to the soul, not to the supernormal; but the ‘psychic degree, or soul’ is conceived of as the ‘organ of the emotive and affective sentiments’.<sup>58</sup> This affective soul plays an important role in the individual’s evolution, as explained in a passage already quoted: ‘If a man has, during his lifetime, sufficiently developed his psychic and above all his mental individuality, these superior elements continue to live, in other conditions of density, and the human personality survives’.<sup>59</sup>

Some of the same terms and ideas are found, differently arranged, in the Integral Yoga. Aurobindo’s concept of the soul is very complex. It is based on the fundamental Upanishadic idea of the *atman* or “self”, which is one with the *brahman* or Absolute. It also includes the later Vedantic idea of the *jivatman* or individual self.<sup>60</sup> But the most distinctive part of Aurobindo’s soul-concept is the psychic being or evolutionary soul, a term which does not

<sup>55</sup> Aurobindo, *Savitri*, 702. Cf. in the same work: ‘The Two who are one are the secret of all power’ (63), ‘The figure of the deathless Two-in-One’ (295), ‘A dual Nature covered the Unique’ (625), and ‘The incarnate dual Power shall open God’s door’ (705).

<sup>56</sup> Aurobindo, *On Himself*, 455.

<sup>57</sup> Theon, article of 1899 quoted in English in Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Principes généraux*, 23.

<sup>59</sup> *Principes généraux*, 26. Gender-specific language as in the original.

<sup>60</sup> Aurobindo, *Letters*, 267, 276. In both of these letters Aurobindo specifically distinguished the *jivatman* from the psychic being.

have any exact equivalent in the Vedantic tradition.<sup>61</sup> In writings from 1926 and after, Aurobindo distinguished the ‘psychic’ or ‘psychic entity’ from the ‘psychic being’. The first of these was ‘the spark of the Divine involved here in the individual existence.’ This psychic entity ‘grows and evolves in the form of the psychic being’. As it moves from life to life, the individual soul gains strength whenever there is ‘a higher movement in us’. Over the course of many lives, ‘by the accumulation of these deeper and higher movements’, a psychic individuality or psychic being takes form. It is this ‘soul-person, the psychic being, that survives and carries mind and life with it on its [evolutionary] journey’.<sup>62</sup>

Aurobindo’s ideas about the psychic being were certainly influenced by the Mother, and the Mother certainly got some of her ideas from Theon. She explained in 1961 that Theon distinguished between the *centre divin* and the *être psychique*, adding that these terms were part of ‘the vocabulary of Theon that I brought’ when she came to India.<sup>63</sup> Theon’s *centre divine* and *être psychique* correspond in many respects to Aurobindo’s psychic entity and psychic being.

### 6c. Physical Perfection

The *corps glorieux*, an important Cosmique concept, has no exact equivalent in the Indian tradition.<sup>64</sup> Aurobindo mentioned the *corps glorieux* by name in a few letters to his disciples, explaining that something of the sort might form part of the physical transformation that would be one of the results of

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<sup>61</sup> After Aurobindo incorporated the term “psychic being” in his philosophy, he and his disciples looked for a corresponding term in Sanskrit texts and dictionaries, and found one in *chaitya purusha* (Aurobindo, *Letters*, 267). This phrase does not occur in the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita* or *Rig Veda*, but rather in some mediaeval texts of secondary importance that had no influence on Aurobindo during his formative years, if indeed he read them at all. When a disciple pointed out that he could not find anything corresponding to the psychic being or psychic evolution in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Aurobindo replied: ‘These things are not in the Gita, but we cannot limit our knowledge by the points in the Gita’ (Aurobindo, *Letters*, 291).

<sup>62</sup> Aurobindo, *Letters*, 296–297, 288; Aurobindo, *Life Divine*, 797.

<sup>63</sup> La Mère, *L’agenda*, 93–94.

<sup>64</sup> There are similar ideas in several Eastern traditions, for example in the *siddha* teachings of Ramalinga Swamikal (Thulasiram, *Arut Perum Jothi*), and certain forms of Tibetan Buddhism (Sogyal Rinpoche, *Tibetan Book*, 171, 292), but the body of light in these traditions does not correspond in many important respects to the *corps glorieux* of Theon.

the “descent of the supermind”, a spiritual process of considerable importance in his method of yoga. In these letters he attributed the idea of the *corps glorieux* to Theon. This would make it appear that his use of the concept was derivative. Interestingly, however, his ideas on the subject were close to Theon’s even before he knew anything about the Philosophie Cosmique. In an early writing not published during his lifetime, Aurobindo gave the elements of physical perfection (*sharirasiddhi*) as health, lightness, beauty (in particular, luminosity), and corporeal delight (which consists in the ability to assimilate every sort of contact).<sup>65</sup> These four elements have a remarkable similarity to the four attributes of the *corps glorieux* as listed in the *Principes généraux* and other Cosmique writings: resistance to disease, lightness, luminosity, and elasticity.<sup>66</sup>

## 7. Parallels between the Kabbalah and the Integral Yoga

As mentioned above, Aurobindo had no direct knowledge of the kabbalah; but there are a number of elements in his philosophy that are similar to ideas in Lurianic kabbalah. Some of these parallels may result, at least in part, from his indirect knowledge of the teachings of Theon. When Aurobindo spoke of physical perfection, he referred to Theon’s *corps glorieux*. In speaking of the *corps glorieux*, the author of the *Principes généraux* (writing on behalf of Theon) referred to ‘certain documents’, almost certainly kabbalistic, that spoke of a body of light. It follows that Aurobindo may have been influenced indirectly by the kabbalah when he spoke of a body of light.

There are other parallels between Aurobindo’s philosophy and the kabbalah that cannot be explained in this way, because there is nothing in the Philosophie Cosmique to provide a link between the kabbalistic teaching and Aurobindo’s philosophy. In section 4, I spoke of the important kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum*. According to Gershom Scholem, this term meant originally ‘concentration’ or ‘contraction’, but was used by Lurianic kabbalists to mean ‘withdrawal’ or ‘retreat’. In brief, *tsimtsum* is the contraction or withdrawal of the Infinite that makes space for the finite creation. By the act of *tsimtsum*, God ‘makes it possible for something which is not *Ein-sof* to exist’.<sup>67</sup> This doctrine, which is at the base of the Lurianic theory of creation, finds no clear echo in the

<sup>65</sup> Aurobindo, *Record of Yoga*, 23. Aurobindo elaborated on each of these four elements in the body of *Record of Yoga*.

<sup>66</sup> *Principes généraux*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 260; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 129.

Philosophie Cosmique. The account of creation in the *Principes* highlights the ability of the Causeless Cause to produce division in Integral Substance, but it does not speak of concentration or contraction.<sup>68</sup>

One of the most distinctive aspects of Aurobindo's cosmology is 'exclusive concentration of consciousness-force', a concept that he developed in a chapter of *The Life Divine*, his major work of philosophy. He begins by saying that 'integral Brahman [the Absolute] cannot be in its integrality the source of the Ignorance [a technical term meaning "separative knowledge", which is the nature of the lower creation], because its integrality is in its very nature all-consciousness'. Ignorance can only come about 'by some concentration of consciousness absorbed in a part knowledge'. After noting that human mind has a power of exclusive concentration that serves certain pragmatic ends, he goes on: 'in the universal order of things, the inconscience of material Nature is the same exclusive concentration ... as in the self-limitation of the waking human mind'. The purpose of this cosmic self-limitation or exclusive concentration 'is to trace the cycle of self-oblivion and self-discovery for the joy of which the Ignorance is assumed in Nature by the secret spirit'.<sup>69</sup> The similarity between Lurianic *tsimtsum* and Aurobindonian exclusive concentration is remarkable.

From the human point of view, Nature's assumption of Ignorance for the sake of a joyful 'self-oblivion and self-discovery' is the responsibility and the privilege of the psychic being. I have already noted that this concept, central to Aurobindo's explanation of the destiny of the individual, has some similarity to the concept of the soul in the Philosophie Cosmique. Both Theon and Aurobindo used the term *être psychique* or psychic being, both spoke of its importance in the soul's evolution. But in the Philosophie Cosmique, the soul's *évolution* (which often means simply "development") is limited to a single life, because Theon rejected reincarnation except in exceptional cases. In Aurobindo, the process of individual evolution requires reincarnation, because the soul needs many lives to accumulate a sufficient number of deeper and higher experiences to give form to a psychic being.

Interestingly, Aurobindo's ideas of soul development are closer to the corresponding ideas in the kabbalah, of which he knew nothing, than to those in

<sup>68</sup>) *Principes généraux*, 10–11.

<sup>69</sup>) Aurobindo, *Life Divine*, 581, 589, 591. Compare the lines of poetry already quoted (footnote 55): "In a hedged creation shut from limitless self, / Bringing down God to the insentient globe ...."

the Philosophie Cosmique, of which he had at least indirect knowledge. Kabbalah has a well developed conception of soul transmigration or reincarnation, which it calls *gilgul*, along with the concept of the *zelem*, a principle of individuality related to but distinct from the soul. Scholem, basing himself on a thirteenth-century kabbalistic text, explains that the *zelem* descends into the world in order to reach ‘a state of perfection which was not the case in the beginning before its descent’.<sup>70</sup> Compare this with a passage in which Aurobindo explains ‘the purpose and origin of the disharmony’ that characterizes the world: ‘Once manifestation began infinite possibility also began’ and among the possibilities was a total negation of Light and Bliss. Once this possibility has appeared, it ‘acquires for the Soul descending into evolutionary manifestation an irresistible attraction which creates the inevitability [of its occurrence]—an attraction which in human terms on the terrestrial level might be interpreted as the call of the unknown, the joy of danger and difficulty and adventure, the will to attempt the impossible, to work out the incalculable, the will to create the new and the uncreated with one’s own self and life as the material’.<sup>71</sup>

## 8. Aurobindo, Theon, the Kabbalah, and the Concept of “Influence” in the History of Ideas

It is clear from the material presented in sections 5–7 that there are many significant correspondences between the teachings of Lurianic kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique of Max Theon and his wife, and the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Whenever there are correspondences between two or more bodies of thought, there exists a possibility that the correspondences are due to influence of one kind or another. In this section I will examine several types of influence that may exist between thinkers or schools of thought and apply my findings to the bodies of thought I have studied in this paper.

Influence is one of the most difficult of all concepts in the history of ideas. Postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have tried to do away with it altogether, but historians still find it valid and useful. As Quentin Skinner says in a much-quoted paper, ‘there is no doubt that the concept of influence, while extremely elusive ... is far from being empty of explanatory force’. He adds, however, that it is ‘easy to use the concept in an apparently explanatory way without any consideration of whether the

<sup>70</sup>) Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 159.

<sup>71</sup>) Aurobindo, *Letters*, 28–29.

conditions sufficient, or at least necessary, for the proper application of the concept have been met'.<sup>72</sup> I will not enter into the details of Skinner's argument, but will try to make some practical distinctions that may help in evaluating whether sufficient and necessary conditions are met in a given case.

There are at least seven possible explanations for similarities between the ideas of two different thinkers or schools of thought: (1) direct influence; (2) indirect influence; (3) separate descent from a common antecedent; (4) independent response to prevailing conditions; (5) independent inspiration without reference to prevailing conditions; (6) a combination of two or more of these factors; (7) sheer coincidence. For there to be direct influence, the necessary condition is that thinker A must have been directly exposed to the thought of thinker B, as Porphyry was influenced by Plotinus. For there to be indirect influence, thinker A must have been exposed to the ideas of thinker B through the intermediary of another thinker or body of thought, as Augustine was influenced by Plato through the intermediary of Plotinus and other Neo-Platonist writers. For there to be separate descent from a common antecedent, thinkers A and B must have been independently exposed to a third thinker or body of thought, know nothing of one another, but share some characteristics, as Pseudo-Dionysius and Abraham ibn Ezra share some Neo-platonic ideas without the second knowing anything about the first. For there to be independent response to prevailing conditions, thinker A and thinker B must arrive at the same ideas without being in contact with each other, as Leibniz and Newton arrived independently at the infinitesimal calculus. For there to be independent inspiration without reference to prevailing conditions, A and B, although belonging to completely different cultures, must arrive at the same or similar concept, as Shankara and Mister Eckhardt formulated concepts of the One that are similar in some respects.

I will now revisit the examples I have given in sections 5–7 with reference to the possibilities sketched in the previous paragraph. In section 5 I pointed out the close correspondence between the concept of *tikkun* in Lurianic kabbalah and the concept of *restitution* in the Philosophie Cosmique. In formulating his theory of *restitution*, Theon was indirectly or perhaps directly influenced by kabbalistic writers. (It is impossible to say for sure whether there was any direct influence from Lurianic texts, because nothing is known about Theon's reading.) There is a strong correlation between the aspects of the kabbalistic ideas of *shekhinah* and *du-parzufim* and the Cosmique idea of *dualité d'être*.

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<sup>72</sup> Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding', 25.



It is probable that this was due in part to indirect or direct influence from kabbalistic sources; but Theon's concept may also have been an independent response to the ideas of soul-kinship current in esoteric circles at the time, and it certainly was given specific form as a result of his own experiences with his spiritual partner. Theon's ideas of the soul and the psychic individual were probably influenced by kabbalistic ideas, but if so they certainly were modified by other ideas and by his own experiences. Theon acknowledged having found the idea of the *corps glorieux* in 'certain [presumably kabbalistic] documents', but he may have relied on his own inner vision or experience in giving his idea a specific form.

Theon's idea of *dualité d'être* was certainly known to the Mother, and she may have passed something of what she knew along to Aurobindo. Thus in this matter Aurobindo may have been indirectly influenced by the Philosophie Cosmique; but when he wrote of the 'dual power' and 'two-in-one' he also had in mind Indian ideas like *purusha-prakriti*, and certainly drew on his personal relationship with the Mother. The Mother learned the term *être psychique* from Theon, and she passed this and other Cosmique terms on to Sri Aurobindo; but Aurobindo's idea of the psychic being owes little to the Cosmique concept of the soul. The Mother spoke to Aurobindo about Theon's *corps glorieux*, and Aurobindo cited this term in a few letters. But before Aurobindo met the Mother he wrote about four elements of physical perfection that are very similar to a list of elements in a Cosmique publication. This is, perhaps, a case of independent inspiration without reference to prevailing conditions.

Aurobindo never read any kabbalistic texts, so there is no question of his being directly influenced by the kabbalah. It is possible, however, that his idea of the Two-in-one was indirectly influenced by the kabbalistic idea of *du-parzufim* via the Philosophie Cosmique and the Mother. Similarly, Aurobindo's ideas of the soul and physical perfection may have been indirectly influenced, via the same intermediaries, by the kabbalistic ideas of the *zelem* and Adam Kadmon. On the other hand, it is possible that Aurobindo's ideas on these matters resemble kabbalistic ideas as a result of independent response to prevailing knowledge or to independent inspiration. Lurianic kabbalah and Aurobindo, but not the Philosophie Cosmique, accepted reincarnation. This may help to explain the similarity between Isaac Luria's and Aurobindo's ideas of soul-evolution. But it is also possible that their ideas on this subject may have been arrived at independently: two mystical thinkers arriving at the same idea as a result of an identical or similar mystical experience.

Aurobindo's idea of 'exclusive concentration of consciousness-force' is remarkably similar to the Lurianic idea of *tsimtsum*. This cannot be explained

by direct or indirect influence, since Aurobindo never read any kabbalistic texts, and the Philosophie Cosmique, of which he had indirect knowledge, does not contain anything like *tsimtsum*. This would seem to be a case of independent inspiration, due perhaps to Luria and Aurobindo having caught the same idea during spiritual reflection or experience. The idea of an originating contraction or separation occurs also in the writings of other mystics, for example Jakob Böhme and William Blake.<sup>73</sup> This suggests that a certain line of mystical thought or experience can lead to a similar concept in different cultural contexts.

In recent years, historians of Western Esotericism have made comparative studies of the bodies of thought I have examined above: Lurianic kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique, and the Integral Yoga.<sup>74</sup> Some of these scholars have made strong claims about influence of Max Theon and his wife on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In their history of the H.B. of L., Godwin, Chanel and Deveney write that Aurobindo and the Mother ‘were very largely inspired by Theon and his wife’.<sup>75</sup> In his dissertation, Chanel goes farther: Sri Aurobindo and the Mother ‘may from many points of view be looked on as disciples of the Theons or in any case as continuers of their work’. In another passage Chanel suggests that the Theons have been denied due recognition by Aurobindo’s followers: The Philosophie Cosmique, he asserts, ‘constitutes one of the essential sources of the teachings of [Aurobindo’s] ashram in Pondicherry, even though this fact is, or was, generally little known or eclipsed’.<sup>76</sup>

What I have written in the preceding sections should be enough to show that these claims are exaggerated. Theon had a good deal of influence on the Mother for three or four years, but he had no direct influence on Aurobindo. Whatever indirect influence he had on him was minor, being confined for the most part to terminology. The Mother may have considered herself a ‘disciple’

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<sup>73</sup> For Böhme, see Brinton, *Mystic Will*, 195: ‘Creation begins with a painful separation from God and the creation of an independent will to the end that this separation may be overcome in a type of unity higher than that with which the process began.’ For Blake, see ‘The Book of Urizen,’ chapter I.

<sup>74</sup> Chanel, Godwin and Deveney have pointed out correspondences between the Philosophie Cosmique and the yoga of Sri Aurobindo (see Chanel, *Théon*, and Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*). See also websites dealing with the Theons, such as ‘Kheper: transformation—evolution—metamorphosis’, and ‘Max Theon et la philosophie cosmique’. Articles pointing out correspondences between the kabbalah and Sri Aurobindo include Chatterjee, ‘Isaac Kook and Sri Aurobindo’, and Kazlev, ‘The Divinisation of Matter’.

<sup>75</sup> Godwin et al., *Hermetic Brotherhood*, 338.

<sup>76</sup> Chanel, *Théon*, 28, 519.

of the Theons at some point, but the relationship between her and them was just one of several relationships she had with spiritual-occult figures before she met Aurobindo. She carried over many ideas from the Theons into her collaboration with Aurobindo, but their work together could hardly be called a continuation of the work of the Theons, about whom Aurobindo had no direct knowledge. All in all, the parallels between the Philosophie Cosmique and Aurobindo's philosophy are interesting but relatively unimportant compared to the enormous influence of the Vedantic tradition of India, which Aurobindo fully acknowledged.

Chanel also notes that it is through the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo 'that the work of the Theons, that is, the Philosophie Cosmique, is present, though unbeknownst to many, in the world today'.<sup>77</sup> This is true, and it draws attention to what might be called the "multinational" side of the transmission of esoteric knowledge. The Philosophie Cosmique, based in large measure on a form of the kabbalah that took shape in what is now Israel, was developed in France and Algeria during the early twentieth century, but now is scarcely remembered in any of these places. Elements of this teaching are present in the Integral Yoga, a system of thought based largely on the Upanishads that was elaborated in India by an English-educated Bengali and a Frenchwoman of Sephardic extraction. This system of yoga is followed by tens of thousands of people in India, and many hundreds in Europe and North America. Thus elements of an esoteric teaching made a journey from mediaeval Spain to Palestine and then back to Europe, where they were repackaged for dissemination in France. From France they were taken to India, and from India they have begun to make their way back to the West.

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<sup>77</sup>) Chanel, *Théon*, 541.

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