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Peter Schäfer: Mirror of His Beauty

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❁ INTRODUCTION ❁

IT BELONGS to the cherished traditions of Western civilization that Judaism “invented” monotheism. In the eyes of most Jews and Christians, as well as numerous scholars of religion, the “monotheistic revolution” of the Hebrew Bible represents a radical break with the backward and underdeveloped abominations of the polytheistic cultures that surrounded—and continuously threatened—ancient Israel. As such, Jewish monotheism is considered to be a decisive step in the development of humanity towards ever higher forms of religion. According to the triumphalistic Christian view of history and its progress-oriented academic counterparts, this “evolution” reached its climax in Christianity (more precisely, in nineteenth-century Protestantism). Just as polytheism inevitably lead to monotheism, so the remote and stern God of Judaism had to be replaced by the loving God of Christianity. When Christianity adopted Jewish monotheism, it simultaneously softened it by including the idea of God’s Trinity and his son’s incarnation on earth. Only through this “extension” of strict monotheism, it is argued, could Christianity liberate true faith from Jewish ossification and guarantee its survival and perfection.

The notion of the necessary evolution of monotheism out of polytheism is as stereotyped as the conceit of its successful fulfillment in Christianity. Regarding the latter, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity can hardly claim, despite the efforts of the church fathers, to manifest the apex of monotheism. As for the former, the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East were certainly not the embodiment of religious crudeness and unethical behavior, yearning to be saved by the dawn of biblical monotheism—an image that our Western tradition has impressed upon us since childhood. Nor did biblical monotheism represent the final and clear-cut break with polytheistic superstition that we have come to believe since Sunday school. The transitions were fluent and flowed in both directions. It was one of the great achievements of the Bible to adopt the abhorrent customs of its pagan neighbors and to domesticate them by integrating them in an evolving

monotheistic system that became ever more dominant. But the many attacks that the authors of the Bible found necessary to launch against the polytheistic practices of their fellow countrymen prove that these alleged “survivals” remained very much alive.

One case in point is the Canaanite goddess Asherah, well-known from the Ugarit pantheon as the consort of El. Literary and archeological evidence suggests that this goddess was worshiped as the consort of Ba'al in Israel as well (1 Kings 18:19). Whether or not the cultic installation of a wooden pole, which is also called “Asherah” in the Bible, symbolized the goddess of the same name, it clearly was a widely recognized object of worship (King Manasseh even brought it into the Temple of Jerusalem; 2 Kings 21:3,7), and only gradually banished from the official biblical cult.¹ Our picture of early Israelite religion has become even more diverse with the discovery of the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud (near the road from Gaza to Eilat), which date from the time of the Judaeen monarchy. They mention the God of Israel (using the classical biblical tetragrammaton YHWH) and, most likely, “his Asherah.” This translation, of course, is controversial—it accords to the Jewish God a Queen consort, who is worshiped together with him—but such a reading cannot be easily dismissed.² Indeed, the Jewish mercenaries who settled at the military colony of Elephantine at the southern border of Egypt precisely during the reign of King Manasseh (about 650 BCE), not only built a temple of their own in Elephantine (in the immediate vicinity of the Egyptian god Khnum), but even worshiped two goddesses alongside Yahu (YHW) in their temple. Their cult obviously reflects—and preserves for more than two centuries³—a stage of the Judaeen religion that can hardly be called monotheistic in the strict sense of the term.⁴

Judaeo-Christian monotheism, then, was neither “achieved” once and forever at a certain point in the history of Western religions, nor is it the peak of any simple religious evolution. The term is not particularly helpful as a historical category, and much less as a moral indicator. Rather, we should consider “monotheism” as one pole of a broad spectrum, of which “polytheism” marks the other. Between these two poles there exists a wide range of possible combinations and configurations, which realize themselves in time and space—not in an ascending line from

(primitive) polytheism to (higher and higher forms of) monotheism, but in movements back and forth between polytheism and varying degrees of monotheism. Such a dynamic model has the benefit of avoiding any value judgement. It does not favor monotheism over polytheism, but neither does it strive to exorcise the prejudice of the alleged superiority of Jewish-Christian monotheism with the attempted revival of ancient pagan values. The latter has become the prerogative of postmodern philosophers and historians of religion,⁵ who extol ancient polytheistic religions as in harmony with nature, appreciate “paganism” as body- and life-affirming,⁶ and claim to rediscover Egyptian “cosmotheism” as the ultimate salvation from the “Mosaic distinction,” that epitome of monotheism.⁷

What is necessary is not to replace one cliché with another but to expose Jewish and Christian monotheism as a construct that encompasses more than the alleged end product, as a process continuously in flux, moving between the poles of a broad and varied spectrum. Such a reevaluation of monotheism recognizes historical developments and shifts of emphasis *within* both Judaism and Christianity, and simultaneously allows for an examination of the relationship *between* both religions that liberates itself from the fatal pattern of the fulfillment of one religion in the other. From this viewpoint the notions of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” within one religion become less fixed,⁸ and the boundaries between the two religions are seen to be permeable.

With the reform of King Josiah towards the end of the seventh century BCE—with its centralization of the cult of the one, unchanging, and male God worshiped in the one Temple in the one city, Jerusalem—Judaism definitely took up the path of an ever stricter monotheism. And yet nothing could be more mistaken than the assumption that the idea of the oneness of God is the quasi-dogmatic “essence” of Judaism. True, the daily *Shema* ‘*Yisra’el*’ prayer proclaims that “the Lord, our God, is one God alone” (Deut. 6:4)—and no one would ever contradict this solemn declaration, at least not openly—but the history of Judaism teaches us that this is only part of the story. Unless we want to ignore the other part and to dismiss any deviation from the strict monotheistic ideal as heresy, we must face the fact that the history of Judaism is much more complex and multifaceted than monotheistic zeal would have us believe.

The most salient example of an intra-Jewish movement that does not comply with the rules of a rigorous monotheism is Jewish mysticism, particularly the variety that bears the technical term “Kabbalah.” It is a thorn in the flesh of all those who regard the liberal Judaism of the nineteenth century as the culmination of monotheism, and accordingly, has long been scorned or suppressed by Jewish and Christian historians of religion alike. But since the pioneering work of Gershom Scholem,⁹ we know that the Kabbalah was one of the most powerful and vital movements in Judaism and that it began as the activity of a learned elite, eventually becoming a popular mass movement that shaped Judaism for centuries to come, up to this very day. To be sure, the Kabbalah is anything but a uniform phenomenon, having developed many faces during a long historical process; there can be no doubt, however, that it promoted some of the most radical ideas in the history of the Jewish religion, ideas that depart considerably from the paradigm of King Josiah and his “monotheistic reform.” That the Kabbalists insisted that their theology was perfectly monotheistic, and that some of these ideas subsequently had to be domesticated to conform to the demands of a more orthodox image of the Jewish religion, only reinforces their radical and bold nature.¹⁰

The most daring innovation of the Kabbalah is its distinction between two “realms” within God: the hidden and transcendent God who is beyond any human comprehension, and the God who has revealed himself and his multiple inner structure to the initiate (the Kabbalist). The revealed God has a dynamic inner life that unfolds in ten potencies (Hebrew *Sefirot*), embodying different “facets” of the one God. The various systems of the Kabbalah develop different configurations of the ten Sefirot (and give them different names), but all agree that these potencies include one female Sefirah; nine are male and one is female. This female principle within God is called *Shekhinah* (literally “dwelling”), a term familiar from classical Rabbinical literature. There, it refers to the presence of God in the world and is always synonymous with God; as such it does not have any feminine characteristics. In the Kabbalah, however, the Shekhinah is not only included as a distinctive principle within the inner divine life, but this distinctive principle is explicitly, and quite graphically, described as female.

These two major innovations of the Kabbalah, in the technical

sense of the term—the ten Sefirot and the inclusion among them of a female potency—emerge for the first time in history in a small book that appears in late twelfth-century Provence in Southern France: the book *Bahir*.¹¹ The earliest sources that we possess already attribute this book to R. Nehunya ben Haqana, a sage of the second century CE, but they disagree about the historical value of this early attribution. Whereas Isaac ben Jacob Cohen of Soria, a Spanish Kabbalist of the late thirteenth century, appeals to it in order to establish the book's origin from ancient Palestine and thus its "orthodoxy,"¹² Meir ben Simon, a Provençal Talmudist and opponent of the Kabbalah in the early thirteenth century, uses it to prove the opposite: that the *Bahir* is a forgery and the product of heretics,

who speak blasphemously of God and of the scholars who walk in the ways of the pure Torah and who fear God, while they themselves are wise in their own eyes, invent things out of their own minds and lean toward heretical opinions. . . . But God save us from the sin of heeding such heretical words, concerning which it would be better to keep silence in Israel. And we have heard that a book had already been written for them,¹³ which they call *Bahir*, that is "bright," but no light shines through it. This book has come into our hands, and we have found that they falsely attribute it to R. Nehunya ben Haqana. God forbid! There is no truth in this. That righteous man, as we know him, did not come to ruin [by editing such a work] and his name is not to be mentioned in the same breath as sacrilege. The language of the book and its whole content show that it is the work of someone who lacked command of either literary language or good style, and in many passages it contains words which are out and out heresy.¹⁴

"Heresy" is the keyword of this fervent accusation, and the heresy against which Meir ben Simon fights is precisely the dreaded danger that the oneness and unity of God might be abandoned and replaced by a multitude of gods; in other words that polytheism, believed to be defeated for centuries, might rise from the dead. What we encounter in the Kabbalah looks indeed very much like the return of the repressed, a return that proved to be all the more forceful and explosive for the longer it had been prevented. And the polytheistic component of the Jewish religion had been repressed for many centuries. This is particularly true

for the feminine element, the notion of goddesses as partners and consorts of the gods. Although Meir ben Simon does not specify this aspect of the detested heresy, it is obvious that he was aware of it and disapproved of it wholeheartedly. For those who had a static perception of the one God and his everlasting victory over the many gods, any supposed or real deviation from this ideal had to be denounced as heresy and to be condemned accordingly. The Kabbalists, however, propagated a different and much more dynamic view of the Jewish religion, boldly claiming that their “new” ideas were nothing but the revival of the “old.” Perhaps they were more correct than they knew or would ever admit.

This book deals with the return of “polytheistic” tendencies in the Kabbalah or, more concretely, of the feminine manifestation of God in the earliest kabbalistic tractate, the Bahir. It takes as its starting point the question of whether the kabbalistic concept of God, with its emphasis on God’s femininity, represents the innovation that it seems to be—despite all of its proponents’ affirmations to the contrary. Or, to put it differently, the book tries to place the Bahir’s concept of God in historical perspective and to demonstrate that its authors were right to claim that all they did and intended to do was reaffirm the “old,” to reestablish the “Torah which was given to Moses on Mount Sinai.” The problem, however, is what they conceived as “old.” Most likely *not* what we today, after centuries of critical biblical research, have come to understand. They could have hardly been aware of the fact that what they offered as the Torah of Moses was in one sense a revival of polytheistic countertendencies in the monotheistic program of the Hebrew Bible, a new breaking up of an encrusted monotheism that had become all too secure of its superiority over “pagan” polytheism and, worst, had neglected or suppressed some of the basic needs of human beings.

In reopening the question of the origin of the bahiric concept of God and his feminine manifestation, I pursue two lines of inquiry. The first part of the book (“From the Bible to the Bahir”) traces the development of the idea of God’s femininity from the Hebrew Bible to the medieval Bahir. It begins in chapter 1 with a discussion of the early Jewish Wisdom tradition, which manifests itself in the canonical books of Job and Proverbs, and in the non-canonical books of Jesus Sirach (Wisdom of ben Sirach) and Sapientia Salomonis (Wisdom of Solomon). What all these texts have

in common is that they connect Wisdom (Hebrew *hokhmah*, Greek *sophia*) with the process of creation and conceive “her” as the intrinsic structure of the created world, which can (in most cases) be obtained and understood by human beings.¹⁵ Moreover, Wisdom is often personified and as such embodies God’s revelation on earth. With the sole exception of Job, all of these texts envisage Wisdom as female, as God’s beloved daughter (Proverbs) or even spouse (Sapientia Salomonis). Clearly in contact and interchange with surrounding Hellenistic cultures, Wisdom literature inaugurates (or rather reaffirms) the idea of a feminine manifestation of God within the received fabric of biblical monotheism.

The most courageous step in ancient Judaism towards the inclusion of the feminine in God was taken in the first century CE by Philo of Alexandria, the famous Jewish philosopher, who is the subject of the second chapter. Influenced both by the biblical Wisdom tradition and by the Greek philosophy of his time (particularly the Stoa and Platonism), Philo develops a complex network of relationships between God, his (female) Wisdom, his (male) Logos, and the human world. In adopting daughter and wife/mother imagery to describe Wisdom, he seems to combine the Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon traditions. Most conspicuously, however, he plays with Wisdom’s gender and goes so far as to change deliberately her sex from female to male, apparently following the Platonic model of the active role of the masculine in contrast to the passive role of the feminine. As such, he embodies the culmination of the biblical and postbiblical Wisdom tradition, which would soon break off in Judaism and be taken up by Christianity.

The next chapter considers one of the most striking transformations of the heritage of the Wisdom tradition: the Sophia myth developed by so-called gnostic Christian groups that flourished in the second century CE. Among the most salient features of their doctrine belongs an elaborate narrative about the origin of the divine realm and of the mundane world. The material world of human beings is considered to be the result of a “mishap” in the divinity, a cosmic catastrophe inaugurated by an imperfect and “false” god, which needs to be mended through the abolition of all matter and the return of the spiritual human soul to its divine origin.

As in the early Jewish Wisdom tradition and in Philo, the gnos-

tic Godhead contains a feminine power, which plays a prominent role in the gnostic myth of creation. According to the Apocryphon of John, one of the earliest and most succinct expositions of the gnostic myth that we now possess, Wisdom (Sophia) is held responsible for the break within the cosmic process and hence for the origin of the material world: she creates an imperfect image of herself who becomes the originator of the material universe outside of the divine realm, an evil counterworld, inhabited by all kinds of “rulers,” “demons,” and finally Adam and Eve with their offspring. In order to rectify her mistake, Sophia is sent down to earth to heal the rupture she caused and to redeem humanity. Here, the task of salvation is reserved for Wisdom, the feminine power of God—not the male Logos.

Quite a different picture emerges from the vast literature (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Targum) passed on to us from the Rabbis, as we will see in Chapter 4. As the creators and leaders of what would become the “classical” and “normative” manifestation of late antique Judaism, the Rabbis presented themselves as *hakhamim* (“wise men,” “sages”); they claimed to be the embodiment of the ideal of “Wisdom” developed in the biblical and postbiblical Wisdom tradition. More precisely, they took up the idea of Wisdom’s identification with the Torah in Jesus Sirach and made it the essence and pivot of their thought. According to the Rabbis, Wisdom/Torah was simultaneously the blueprint of and God’s tool for the creation of the universe; hence, the one who masters the Torah masters the world. It goes without saying that the Rabbis, with their concept of the dual (“Written” and “Oral”) Torah revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai and transmitted to them, regarded themselves as the sole and true guardians of the Torah and its correct interpretation.

In adopting the equation of Wisdom with the Torah from Jesus Sirach, the Rabbis emphasized the availability of Wisdom on earth: Wisdom/Torah was given to human beings and is not only present among us, but at our disposal. Yet this increased availability was achieved at the expense of Wisdom’s personality and her close relationship with God. Wisdom lost her persona and became a book, albeit a book revealed by God. Despite abandoning the biblical and postbiblical idea of Wisdom’s personal presence among the people of Israel (as God’s emissary), the Rabbis maintained and expanded the concept that *God* made himself

present and available on earth. For this, they invented the term “Shekhinah” (from Hebrew *shakhan*, “to dwell, reside”), which denotes God’s “indwelling” or “presence” on earth. But there is little in the vast literary corpus left to us by the Rabbis to indicate that this Shekhinah has any female attributes. On the contrary, despite the feminine gender of the Hebrew word “Shekhinah,” the Rabbis went to great efforts to emphasize that the Shekhinah is no one else but the familiar (male) God of the Hebrew Bible. Even as a distinction between God and “his Shekhinah” was gradually introduced, leading to the increasing personification of the Shekhinah, they affirmed the unquestionable masculinity of their image of God. For the Rabbis, the feminine aspect of God seems to have been completely forgotten.

The most radical step in this direction was taken by the Jewish philosophy of the early Middle Ages, which developed under the influence of Islam and its adaptation of Greek philosophy. In fact, the early representatives of medieval Jewish philosophy are the most outspoken advocates of a rationalistic trend that was up in arms against anthropomorphic tendencies in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, the Jewish philosophers were concerned to recover what they believed was the original and pure form of Jewish monotheism, and they fought against what they feared was its all-too-human aberration. Theirs was the concept of a transcendent and spiritual God, dwelling not on earth but in the most remote heights of heaven or rather, even beyond the heavenly realm and certainly beyond human comprehension.

These philosophical and theological developments have important ramifications for the concept of the Shekhinah, as we will see in Chapter 5, which discusses the doctrines of Saadia Gaon (882–942 CE), Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona (ca. 1035–1105), Judah ha-Levi (before 1075–1141), and Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). The image that these philosophers formed of God did not tolerate the Rabbinic concept of the Shekhinah as God’s presence on earth. Since they could not simply eliminate this familiar and cherished Rabbinic tradition, they audaciously reinterpreted it, suggesting that the Shekhinah was not identical with God but on the contrary a created entity. With this move, they fended off the danger of positing any multiplicity within God and rejected latent polytheistic tendencies inherent in the concept of the Shekhinah. By “cleansing” God of any hint of corporeality, they simulta-

neously eliminated any trace of divine gender, whether male or female.

With Chapter 6, we reach the late twelfth century and the appearance of the Bahir, the kabbalistic counterpart of rationalistic Jewish philosophy. In many ways, the Bahir represents the return of the repressed: the recovery of an archaic and mythical world with a rich imagery that graphically depicts the dynamic inner life of the Godhead, the origin of evil, and God's relationship with his created world. Against the philosophers, it revives the Rabbinical concept of the Shekhinah as identical with God. It goes much further still, however, reintegrating the Shekhinah into God as one of the facets and aspects of his essence that can be fathomed and described by the initiate. And initiates they were, the editors of the Bahir and the heralds of its old/new doctrine. They knew that God, the heavenly King of the Rabbis, has "sons" who constitute, together with their father, the Godhead (the ten Sefirot) and that one of these "sons" is actually female, hence his "daughter." Moreover, they maintained that this "daughter" is simultaneously his "spouse"; in other words, that the "King" has a "Queen" with whom he procreates children (who are the people of Israel on earth).

It is this dynamic relationship between the manifold Godhead with its female component and the created world of human beings that constitutes the focus of the Bahir's creative interest. Within this interplay of divine and human forces, great importance is attached to the role of the Shekhinah. As the tenth and "lowest" among the Sefirot, the Shekhinah stands at the borderline between the heavenly and earthly realms and is sent down to earth as God's emissary. In her dual capacity as part of the Godhead and the "Oral Torah," she serves as God's "embodiment" on earth, with the sole task of leading Israel back to God and then, upon completion of her mission, reuniting herself with the Godhead. The bahiric Shekhinah is the bridge between both worlds, the true intercessor (*mediatrix*) between God and humanity.

In the chronological survey of the first six chapters, the bahiric concept of the Shekhinah has been located within the history of the suppression and reinterpretation of feminine images of the divine in Judaism and Christianity. This background, however, only serves to sharpen the problem of the origins of this concept, starkly exposing the kabbalistic notion of God's femininity as a

radical departure from earlier Jewish models. It is to this problem that we turn in the second part of the book, “The Quest for Origins.” I begin, in Chapter 7, with an examination of Scholem’s explanatory model, which suggests that the concept originated in the gnostic systems of the first centuries of the Christian era. When we confront his theory with a fresh analysis of the gnostic sources, most of which were unavailable to Scholem, the result is quite paradoxical. Despite Scholem’s dubious sources and particular prejudices, his intuition did not fail him. The bahiric idea of the Shekhinah comes closer to the gnostic myth than Scholem thought or was able to prove. This intensifies the problem posed by the fact that no historical connection between the “Gnosis” and the Bahir can be established.

However instructive and illuminating structural or phenomenological similarities may be, they are not particularly satisfying. In order to test the historical background more thoroughly, the eighth chapter turns to examine the immediate *Christian* context of twelfth-century France, the provenance of the Bahir itself. Scholem tried in vain to find some connection between the Bahir and the supposedly gnostic movements of the Cathari and Albigenses, but he completely ignored a more obvious and widespread phenomenon that profoundly shaped the Christian environment of the Jews in twelfth-century France: the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The chapter summarizes the evolution of the veneration of Mary from its beginnings in the Eastern church until it reached Western Christendom. Although Western theologians were initially hesitant to adopt Eastern Mariology, it is striking that their veneration of Mary would reach its climax in the twelfth century—at precisely the time when the Bahir was being edited.

When we examine the Marian doctrines of Peter Damian (1007–1072), Herman of Tournay (ca. 1090–ca. 1147), Bernard of Clairvaux (1091–1153), Godfrey of Admont (ca. 1100–1165), Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), and Peter of Blois (ca. 1135–1212?), we find striking parallels with the increased emphasis on the feminine aspects of divinity in the Kabbalah. All of these writers emphasize Mary’s function as mediator (*mediatrix*) between God and humanity and as intercessor (*interventrix*) on behalf of humankind. Mary is essential for the success of God’s plan of salvation; she “repairs” the first creation, which was spoiled by Eve.

As such she is praised as the “restorer” (*reparatrix*) of humanity and, together with her son Jesus, assumes the role of co-redeemer (*corredemptrix*). Hildegard even goes so far as to bestow on her the honorary title “savior” (*salvatrix*), usually reserved for Christ.

In her pivotal position, raised above human beings and angels alike, Mary is identified with biblical Wisdom. Her assumption into heaven not only reunites her with her son Jesus but elevates her into the holy Trinity. The eleventh and twelfth centuries thus saw the gradual deification of Mary — although often veiled with dogmatic considerations and frequently qualified by the superficial subordination of Mariology to Christology. It appears that the role and function of the Christian Mary comes very close to the role and function of the Jewish Shekhinah in the Bahir.

If the medieval Christian veneration of Mary is historically and geographically much closer to the Bahir than Scholem’s proposed “Gnosis,” can one seriously assume that the reemergence of God’s femininity in Judaism was influenced by similar developments in Christianity? Such a proposal becomes all the more problematic in view of the long history of Christian polemics against the Jewish “stubbornness” in not believing in Jesus and Jewish polemics against Mary (Chapter 9). Christian sources transmit a number of legends that portray the Jews as full of hatred against Mary and her son Jesus: they disturb Mary’s funeral in order to desecrate the holy body of the deceased Virgin, they dishonor the image of the Virgin by throwing it into a latrine, and they try to burn their own children who partake of the Holy Communion together with their Christian playmates. These stories originate in the Byzantine East and travel to the West, where they are readily adopted and widely publicized in both literature and art.

Such anti-Jewish legends and images could have hardly escaped the attention of the Jews. They responded with similarly unflattering narratives in which they polemicize against the Christian claim of Mary’s virginity and the gradual process of her deification. Quite surprisingly, however, these responses are not as clear-cut and unambiguous as one might expect. The famous (or rather infamous) *Toledot Yeshu*, the best-known polemical Jewish tractate of Late Antiquity, reserves its polemical fervor for Jesus and to a large extent spares his mother Mary. A much more compli-

cated story is told in the Apocalypse of Zerubbavel, a Byzantine-Jewish apocalypse from the early seventh century. Here the Christian narrative of the birth of the Messiah Jesus from the Virgin Mary is parodied in the counternarrative of the birth of the Antichrist Armilos from a beautiful statue with which Satan had intercourse. Yet the same text provides us with a mother of the Jewish Messiah, who plays an active role in the redemption process and helps her son to gain the final victory over the Antichrist. Thus the polemical rejection of Mary's function in the process of salvation is supplemented by the adaptation, or rather usurpation, of her role in a Jewish context.

This connection between Judaism and Christianity in an area in which it was the least expected makes the question of historical channels and trajectories of supposed mutual influences all the more pressing and disturbing. Such questions, however, raise major methodological problems that concern the nature of categories such as "origins," "dependence," "influence," and historical "evidence." In the last chapter I propose to reconsider these terms: instead of searching for the single mythical "origin" of a concept, I suggest that we focus our attention upon the dynamic interplay of the various factors under consideration in their historical dimension; and instead of defining "influence" as the interaction between two static entities, of which one is "active" and the other "passive," I present a dynamic model of "influence," in which both partners are engaged in a process of creative adaptation. Such a model rejects the myth of the "priority of origins" and instead draws our attention to the continuous *process* of the digestion, transformation, and recreation of traditions in ever-changing historical circumstances.

Applied to the Jewish and Christian view of God's femininity, such a dynamic theory of influence yields a much more colorful picture. It does not consider both religions as static and distinct entities but as two components of one religious discourse; it is not concerned with the origin of this idea in one or the other religion but with the process of its transformation in a shared cultural space, a process that gains its vitality through mutual exchange. Such a model takes into account a historical process extending over a longer period of time, as well as permitting a highly intensified exchange in the twelfth century, in particular. During this century, which marks the heyday of an entirely new

view of the feminine both in the religious (veneration of Mary) and in the secular realm (love poetry of the troubadours), both Judaism and Christianity reach the climax of their high esteem for the feminine. This high esteem results from a long process, which is rooted in the shared Biblical Wisdom tradition, continues in different ways in Judaism and Christianity, and yet intersects at various points in history in mutual attraction and repulsion.

In proposing that the blossoming of the veneration of the Virgin Mary in the Christian world and the reintegration of the Shekhinah into the divinity in Judaism are neither accidental nor merely the results of parallel developments, I follow the increasing trend in recent scholarship to reject the static and erratic image of Judaism and Christianity as hermetically sealed against one another, forever frozen, as it were, in a perpetual state of hatred and fear.¹⁶ The Jews of Southern France certainly did not live in a ghetto; they participated in a society that they shared with their Christian neighbors. To be sure, they were a minority culture dominated by a majority culture, but this does not necessarily mean that the minority culture defined itself solely in antipathy to the hegemonic culture. On the contrary, both communities lived in close proximity, and the common ground of daily life clearly facilitated a high degree of interaction. Ivan Marcus calls this phenomenon of cultural openness and adaptation “inward acculturation” and puts the emphasis on the often inverted and parodistic ways in which ancient Jewish traditions were fused with Christian themes and images.¹⁷ This is certainly the case, but we will see that inward attraction and adaptation as the correlate of outward repulsion and rejection could come along in two disguises: as a parodistic counternarrative and as the naïve (or brazen) retelling of the same story.

The range of themes and texts, the span of time, and the geographical area covered in this book are alarmingly wide, and I gladly admit that each chapter merits a monograph of its own. Each has its own host of specialists within the scholarly community, and I am painfully aware that I cannot do justice to all of their manifold expectations. It is, however, not my aim here to write these many monographs and to fulfill the expectations that the specialists legitimately have. I take the deliberate risk of drafting a much broader picture, conscious of all the shortcomings that such an undertaking entails. It is my firm conviction that the

time is more than ripe for such an enterprise, as daring as it may be, and that scholarly progress cannot and must not be restricted to ever-higher degrees of specialization.

I am also aware that it is a delicate venture for any “serious” historian to propose the possibility of the inward Jewish adaptation of Christian patterns. Not only does such research easily incur the reproach of being speculative and not providing sufficient evidence. Moreover, and more precariously, the historian is exposed to the danger of consciously or unconsciously bringing his/her own personal background into the sacred halls of scholarship and, depending on that background, betraying his/her own identity or oppressing the identity of the other. Woe to the historian of Judaism who happens to be Christian (Roman Catholic, no less) and to “discover” that the Christian veneration of Mary might have had an impact on the feminine manifestation of God in the Kabbalah! And yet, in the long run, I am confident in our ability to liberate ourselves, not only from medieval stereotypes, but also from modern ones.