

EMANATION AND RETURN TO THE ONE

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In this article, RCUI Instructor Lloyd Abrams, Ph.D., FRC, explains the Neoplatonist doctrine of “Emanation and Return” and presents some of its many applications throughout the history of Western Esotericism.



The Neoplatonist doctrine of “Emanation and Return” is a central organizing theme of the Western Esoteric Tradition. In Neoplatonism, the source of everything, the highest divinity and ultimate reality, is “the One,” a formless, infinite, simple unity. As such, it is beyond comprehension by the physical senses and rational thought. For Neoplatonists, “all theoretical discussions of the One are finally inadequate, since its true nature is revealed only in the mystical union.”¹ Plotinus likened the One to a fountain that overflows, and it is this out-flowing or emanation from the One that gives rise to all of the other levels of existence. In this model, creation is a sequential, stepwise process, from higher and more perfect levels down to lower and lower levels, finally ending with the material world of multiplicity and oppositions.

What exactly is it that emanates or flows out of the One? Since the One is a simple unity, without component parts or separate attributes, it must be the stuff of the One itself, infinite and unknowable. As we have seen, Plotinus compared it to water overflowing from a fountain. Light is often used as a metaphor for this divine flow, as light is non-material and expands infinitely in all directions. Sometimes terms like

Spirit or spiritual energy are used to express this sense of flowing. The word “spirit” is related to wind or breath, both of which are flowing air. The Neoplatonists sometimes used more abstract terms, such as “causation” or “influence” flowing downward from one level to the next. Whatever terminology we encounter in the various esoteric systems, we should remember that these are all metaphors for a metaphysical concept rather than descriptions of a physical process.

Plotinus’s model includes three “hypostases,” or fundamental levels of reality. The first and highest is the unknowable “One,” which emanates the next level, called *Nous*, translated as Divine Mind or Intelligence. This second level contains the Platonic Forms or Ideas, which we can know intellectually, and so this level is also called the Intelligible World. *Nous* then emanates the next lower level, *Psychē* or Soul, which animates the physical world and serves as an intermediary between the Intelligible World and the material world we know with our physical senses. Later Neoplatonists added more and more intermediaries and multiple levels of being to Plotinus’s original model, but the basic idea remained the same. Everything comes from an original ineffable unity by a process of sequential emanation, resulting in a graded hierarchy of levels or states of being, from the highest divinity down to the lowest materiality. This hierarchical structure has been called “The Great Chain of Being.”

There are two seemingly conflicting implications inherent in this model. First, the sequential emanation of successively



lower and lower levels of being emphasizes how we and our physical world are so separated from the divine level and so far from connection with the One. Emanation proceeds farther and farther from the original source, and each level differs more and more from the original unity and perfection of the One. At the same time, however, since everything arises by a process of emanation from the One, everything is ultimately composed of the same basic stuff as the One. Therefore, in its deepest essence, even the lowliest particle of inert matter shares a common nature with the One. So there is a profound connection, or unity, underlying the apparent multiplicity of the physical world, and of the entire hierarchy of worlds. That is why it is possible for us to strive to return to our source, the One. The Neoplatonists asserted that all things naturally desire to return to their source, to re-unite with their cause. As the One is the first cause of everything, all things have an inherent tendency to return to the One. This Neoplatonist picture of emanation followed by striving for reintegration is referred to as the doctrine of “Procession and Return.”

In the Individual Human Life

In addition to applying to the history and structure of the universe, this pattern of procession and return also applies to the individual human life. The Neoplatonists believed that each human soul originates from the divine level, and that it descends through the seven spheres of the planets to arrive on earth and enter a physical body. As it descends, the soul is “stained” and weighed down by taking on characteristics from each of the planets it passes near. (That is how one’s personality and fate are affected by the positions of the various planets at the time of birth.) During one’s life, the soul is described as imprisoned within the physical body. At the time of death, if the soul has not been too attached to the material world

and the pleasures of the physical senses, it can be freed to rise back up through the seven planetary spheres, being progressively purified by giving back at each level what it had taken on during its descent, until it regains its original purity and finally returns to re-unite with the One.

Mysticism is attempting to make that return trip to divine union while one is still alive, rather than waiting until after death. For the Neoplatonists, the model remains the same. Mystics purify themselves by not being too attached to the physical world and the pleasures of the senses, and by living in accord with the divine will. Then, by engaging in various means, such as meditation, prayer, and ritual practices, the mystic sends his or her soul or consciousness up through the spheres toward re-union with the One.

The Neoplatonist doctrine of “Procession and Return” underlies many aspects of the Western Esoteric Tradition. This archetypal theme of a Fall from a perfect state of unity and divinity into the material world of multiplicity and oppositions, and striving to eventually re-unite with the original divine oneness, is prevalent in many spiritual traditions and common cultural concepts. In other branches of the Western Esoteric Tradition, the mystical return to the One is known as the spiritual ascent, union with God, reintegration, etc.

In Mystical Religious Traditions

In Jewish Kabbalah, the material world is seen as the end product of a series of successive emanations from the original infinite oneness, called *Ain Sof*. In one version, the *Ain Sof* emanates the highest, most spiritual world (the World of Nearness), which in turn emanates the next lower level (the World of Creation), which emanates the next lower level (the World of Formation), which emanates our physical world (the World of Action). In another version, the *Ain Sof* emanates a series of ten *Sefirot*, or

vessels for the Divine Light. Each vessel (*Sefirah*) emanates the next lower vessel. At each successive level, the *Sefirot* become more and more “dense” and the Divine Light is more and more veiled, culminating again in our material world. One can then engage in meditation and other esoteric practices in an attempt to raise the soul (or consciousness) up through the four worlds or the ten *Sefirot* to obtain a direct experience of Divinity.

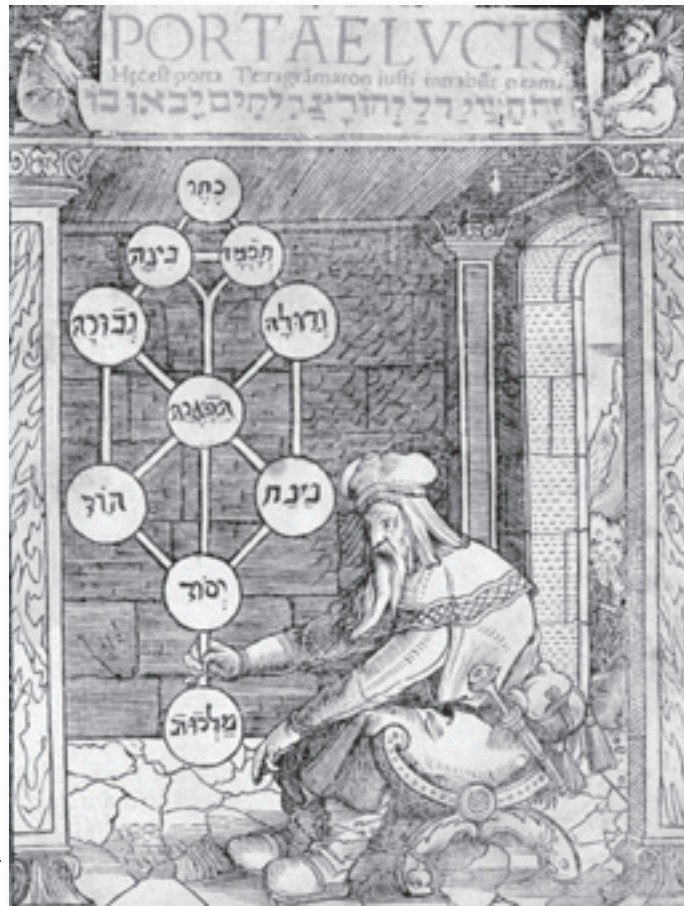
Another system of spiritual ascent was used in the pre-Kabbalistic Jewish mysticism known as *Merkavah* Mysticism (the Way of the Chariot), which consisted of raising the soul up through a series of seven holy palaces (*Hekhalot*). The goal was to reach the seventh and highest palace, where one could obtain a vision of God’s throne similar to the one described by the prophet Ezekiel. This is reminiscent of the Neoplatonist ascent through the seven planetary spheres to re-unite with the One.

In esoteric Islam, the Sufi master Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan said that the essence of Sufism is “the story of every soul’s descent into existence, its experiences of suffering brought about by separation from its original state of being, and the subsequent journey of return and reawakening to its Divine nature.”²

Jacob Boehme said the same thing about the essence of Christianity:

The whole Christian religion consists in this: that we learn to know ourselves, what we are, where we have come from, how we left unity and entered into multiplicity, evil, and disjointed, strife-filled life, and where we are to return from this life in time. All that is necessary for us to know about religion derives from

this: to come out of disunity and vanity, and to enter again into the one tree from which all of us stem.³



The first representation of the sephirotic tree in print, in Joseph Gikatilla, *Portae Lucis* (Doors of Light), translated by Paulus Ricius (Augsburg, Germany: 1516).

The Christian Neoplatonist known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite described a hierarchy of nine orders of angels who exemplified the process of cosmic emanation by passing on diminishing amounts of Divine Light to each subsequent lower level:

Hierarchy . . . ensures that when [the first rank of angels] . . . have received this full and divine splendor they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God’s will to beings further down the scale.⁴

. . . [God] supernaturally pours out in splendid revelations to the superior beings the full and initial brilliance of his astounding light, and successive beings in their turn receive their share of the



divine beam, through the mediation of their superiors. The beings who are first to know God . . . ungrudgingly impart to [those below them] the glorious ray which has visited them so that their inferiors may pass this on to those yet farther below them. Hence, on each level, predecessor hands on to successor whatever of the divine light he has received and this, in providential proportion, is spread out to every being.⁵

Martinism teaches that our original estate is divine, but that there was a Fall from this original divine status to a degraded state of conflict and chaos, and that our purpose and goal is to return to that original Divine Estate, a process called “reintegration.” Louis Claude de Saint-Martin said that Divine Union is the true end of man; that we are all widowed and we are called to a second marriage.⁶

In addition to individually seeking reunion or reintegration with Divinity for ourselves, in Martinism, as in Lurianic Kabbalah, human beings have the special purpose and function of bringing about the reintegration of the entire world with its divine source. In the Kabbalistic system of Isaac Luria, sparks of the emanated divine light have become trapped or imprisoned within the matter of the physical world, and the practices of Kabbalah serve to liberate those holy sparks and raise them back up to their divine source. This process of raising the holy sparks of light is called *Tikkun Olam*, or “repairing the world.” *Tikkun*, or repairing, is associated with the Kabbalistic concept of the *Mashiach*, or Messiah. In the Martinist tradition, Martínez de Pasquales and Louis Claude de Saint-Martin also used this same term, “The Repairer,” to refer to the Christ.⁷ Gershom Scholem, pioneer of the modern academic study of Kabbalah, often translated the Kabbalistic concept of *Tikkun* as “reintegration.”⁸

In the Bible

The book of Genesis provides a version of “procession” from divine oneness in the story of the Fall of Man. Adam and Eve are exiled from communion with God in Paradise and expelled into the terrestrial world. There is a tradition that the angel Raziel taught Kabbalah to Adam so that human beings might one day return to Paradise to be re-united with God.

In the book of Exodus [13:3], Egypt is called “The House of Bondage.”⁹ The condition of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt is analogous to the Neoplatonist description of the human soul as imprisoned within the physical body. Leaving Canaan and going “down into Egypt” is an echo of Adam’s Fall from Paradise. It is followed by a return via the Exodus from Egypt to a direct encounter with God at Mount Sinai. Thereafter, God literally dwells among the people. The *Shekhinah*, God’s presence in the terrestrial world, was said actually to reside in the Tabernacle and later in Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem.

There was another echo of this archetypal pattern when Nebuchadnezzar’s army destroyed Solomon’s Temple and carried the Israelites out of Jerusalem into exile in Babylonia. When Babylon was later conquered by the Persians, the Israelites were permitted to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the Temple. Stories of exile and yearning for restoration are also versions of the archetypal theme of “Procession and Return.”

Each of the ten *Sefirot* in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life symbolizes the expression of Divinity on a different level in the sequence of emanations, and each *Sefirah* carries a different Name of God. So it seems as if the Divine Oneness itself is fragmented into separate entities. The *Shekhinah* is the manifestation of the Divine Presence here in the terrestrial world, as distinct from *Ain Sof*,

the infinite and transcendent Godhead. In a sense, God is in exile from Himself. But the Biblical prophet Zechariah [14:9] says that one day “God will be One and His Name will be One.” Martinism speaks of reintegrating Divinity, and this is also a major aspect of Lurianic Kabbalah. Re-uniting the various aspects of God as they are manifested at each level of emanation is thus another expression of the theme of Procession and Return.

In Cultural Concepts

Another version of the theme of a Fall from an earlier splendor to the current debased condition is expressed in the idea of the Golden Age. According to this idea, at some time in the past, people were wiser and more noble, they possessed secret knowledge that has been lost, they were closer to Divinity and more in harmony with natural laws. But, for various reasons, humanity has degenerated, become more selfish and corrupt, and has lost the higher knowledge necessary for restoring our original status. But it is possible for us to regain the lost wisdom and return to our previous noble estate. The story of Atlantis is a well-known version of this archetypal pattern.

The Renaissance humanists believed in an ancient *prisca theologia*, or primordial religious tradition, which contained the highest knowledge of Divinity, and which had been lost over time. This motivated their interest in rediscovering and translating works from ancient Greek philosophy, the Hermetic writings, and the Jewish Kabbalah. They believed that all of these traditions flowed from the same, more ancient source, the *prisca theologia*. For example, in the sixteenth century, the Christian Kabbalist Johann Reuchlin wrote that “Pythagoras drew his stream of learning from the boundless sea of the Kabbalah,”¹⁰ and “Almost all Pythagoras’ system is derived from the Kabbalists.”¹¹ The Renaissance humanists hoped that by rediscovering the ancient pagan and Jewish esoteric traditions and incorporating them into their Christian system, they could regain the previous, more intimate and authentic, relationship with Divinity.

Another example of this same theme is the idea of the Noble Savage; that primitive cultures are more beneficent, more moral, and more attuned to Divinity and natural law, and that modern society has fallen from this noble status to become corrupt, debased, and disconnected from our source.



Moses on Mount Sinai. Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904).



This is also echoed in the concept of childhood as an idealized state of natural goodness and closeness to Divinity, which is debased and lost through the corrupting effects of childrearing practices, socialization, and education.

In its most generalized form, this archetype finds expression in the ubiquitous human experience of nostalgia, the yearning to return to an earlier and better existence.

Uniting Heaven and Earth

Return or reintegration can also be expressed as uniting the Divine world and the physical world. This is expressed in some Gnostic Christian writings.

In the Bruce Codex, a Coptic papyrus from the second or third century, Jesus says:

Happy is the man . . . who has brought down Heaven unto Earth, who has taken the Earth and raised it to the Heavens, so that they are no longer divided. . . If you know my Word you may make Heaven descend upon Earth so that it may abide in you.¹²

A verse from the Gospel of Thomas says:

His students said to him,
When will the kingdom come?
Yeshua said,
It will not come because you are watching for it. No one will announce, "Look here it is," or "Look, there it is." The father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it.¹³

And so, reintegration with the One can also mean an enduring change in consciousness, in which we integrate the highest states of consciousness into our daily lives, so that we experience the unity underlying the multiplicity of the world; we see the radiance of the Divine Light shining through the veil of matter; we experience the presence of God in our everyday lives.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 59.
- ² Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, *Awakening: A Sufi Experience* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 3-4.
- ³ Arthur Versluis, ed., *The Wisdom of Jacob Böhme* (Minneapolis: New Grail Publishing, 2003), 13.
- ⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*. In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 154 [165A].
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 178 [301B-301C].
- ⁶ "Portrait de M. de Saint-Martin, fait par lui-même," in *Œuvres Posthumes*, 2 vols., 1807. Cited in A. E. Waite, *Saint-Martin: The French Mystic and the Story of Modern Martinism* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1992), 19.
- ⁷ Christian Rebisse, "Ieschouah: Grand Architect of the Universe," *Pantacle 2* (2002): 3.
- ⁸ Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 38-39.
- ⁹ Biblical translations in this article use the King James Version.
- ¹⁰ Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah [De Arte Cabalistica]*, trans. Martin & Sarah Goodman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 233.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 241.
- ¹² Cited in Nevill Drury, *The Gods of Rebirth* (London: Prism Press, 1988), 54.
- ¹³ *The Gospel of Thomas*. In *The Gnostic Bible*, eds. Willis Barnstone & Marvin Meyer (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 69.