

**GENDER, KABBALAH AND THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION:
A STUDY OF THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY
OF GUILLAUME POSTEL (1510-1581)**

BY

YVONNE PETRY

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of History
University of Manitoba
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Yvonne Petry 1997 (c)

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ABSTRACT

The sixteenth century produced an array of remarkable religious figures, but few were more unusual and less orthodox than Guillaume Postel. He would suffer for the originality of his message: he was declared insane by the Venetian Inquisition, imprisoned for heresy, and spent the last eighteen years of his life under virtual house arrest in Paris. While various components of his theology were considered heretical, his most surprising claim was that a female messiah had arrived on earth. In 1547, Postel had met a pious Italian woman, named Joanna, whom he called the New Eve and considered as his own spiritual mother. His prophetic message, that she had personally ushered in a new age of political and religious harmony, was the apex of a complex system of thought which integrated aspects of mystical Judaism with Christianity.

Postel is generally viewed as a marginal figure, whose unconventional religious views preclude comparison with his contemporaries. However, this study analyzes his thought within two contexts. The first is that of Jewish mysticism; such an analysis reveals that in spite of Postel's reliance on Kabbalah, his purpose was the defense of Catholic dogma. While his theology was heterodox, it contained elements which served to justify those Catholic doctrines which were under attack in the sixteenth century: free will, celibacy, the Eucharist, and the Virgin Mary. This conservative element in Postel's thought is reinforced through an examination of his notions of gender within

the context of the sixteenth-century debate over the nature of Woman, the *querelle des femmes*. While others began questioning the view that women were categorically inferior to men, Postel used it as the starting point of his mystical theology. In terms of both his religious views and philosophical assumptions, Postel can be seen as trying to perpetuate the late-medieval world view which was breaking down during the volatile period in which he lived. His thought has relevance not only for an understanding of Jewish-Christian interaction in the Renaissance, but also for Reformation controversy and for gender studies in the early modern period.

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I greatly appreciate the patient and friendly help provided over the years by Karen Morrow, History Department Secretary. I also thank the staff at Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba. Many happy hours were spent in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, during which I relied on the services of the staff there.

I was financially supported by the University of Manitoba and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Without such support my work could not have been undertaken.

My friends in the graduate program have seen me through those periods of self-doubt and mental fatigue that seem to go hand-in-hand with doctoral research. Linda has been my confidante, intellectual sparring partner and supportive friend. Graeme has shown an unwavering faith in me and my work. Maureen has always been ready with a word of encouragement.

My family has always supported my academic efforts. Each of my brothers - Norman, Robert and Roger - has contributed to my intellectual development through our shared conversations, to my personal growth through the model of his own life, and to my happiness through being my brother. I'm grateful to Norm for help with printing out the final version. My father, who passed away during the first year of my doctoral program, left me with his passion for learning and love of history. And my mother shows me daily, through the example of her own life, the value of having both high aspirations and the diligence to attain them.

NOTE ON SOURCES

There are a certain number of common problems associated with the study of sixteenth-century texts. Inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation and the use of accents are endemic. I have retained the original spellings in French and Latin, including the rather inconsistent use of accents, although *Is* have been changed to *J*s where appropriate. Several of Postel's books were published without consistent page numbers. I have used whatever form of numbering exists and where there are no page numbers, I have provided chapter numbers. Where only one side of the page is numbered, in book or manuscript form, I have used the abbreviation *fol.* and indicated *verso* if it is on the left (unnumbered) side of the page. I have provided full titles of sixteenth-century books in the bibliography, but have used short titles in the footnotes. Postel's manuscripts contain extensive insertions and marginal notes. In quotations from his manuscripts, I have indicated these marginal insertions with brackets < >.

Postel's manuscripts are scattered throughout the libraries of Europe, but I have concentrated my research on those found in the collection of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris (*fonds latin* and *fonds français* designated in the footnotes as *BN.ms.f.lat.* or *f.fr.* respectively). I have provided the title of the treatises which are bound together in these manuscript collections, since they serve to indicate the nature and content of Postel's writings. Many of

Postel's manuscripts were published by François Secret and I have also used these extensively.

A note on spelling: some historians use *Kabbalah* to refer to the Jewish tradition and the latinized spelling, *Cabala*, to refer to the Christian stream. I have chosen to use *Kabbalah* for both, since it is generally clear from the context whether I am referring to Christianity or Judaism. In this I am following the example of François Secret, who uses the same spelling for both.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
NOTE ON SOURCES	v
<u>Chapter One:</u> INTRODUCTION	1
<u>Chapter Two:</u> BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY	43
<u>Chapter Three:</u> POSTEL'S POLITICAL VIEWS	85
<u>Chapter Four:</u> POSTEL AND RENAISSANCE KABBALAH	115
<u>Chapter Five:</u> POSTEL, JOANNA AND THE VIRGIN MARY	153
<u>Chapter Six:</u> POSTEL'S NOTIONS OF BODY AND SOUL	189
<u>Chapter Seven:</u> POSTEL AND THE <i>QUERELLE DES FEMMES</i>	212
<u>Chapter Eight:</u> CONCLUSION	246
BIBLIOGRAPHY	265

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

In 1549, Guillaume Postel wrote a letter to Andreas Masius, a Belgian Hebrew scholar and one of Postel's closest friends, describing his studies.¹ At that time, Postel had been reading the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, one of the texts of the Jewish mystical tradition. This book describes God as containing both male and female components and suggests that messianic redemption will occur through the union of male and female; it also describes a figure called the Mother of the World.² In his letter, Postel stated that he considered this concept to be the fulfillment of the eternal mystery of the universe. He then confided to his friend that he had actually met someone who personified this female spirit and who contained within herself the spirit of Christ.³ This is one of the earliest records of Postel's prophecy of the New Eve, the female messiah whom he believed would redeem the world and bring about an age of universal concord.

¹His letters to Masius were reproduced in Jacques Georges de Chauffepié, *Nouveau dictionnaire historique et critique: pour servir de supplement ou de continuation au dictionnaire historique et critique de M. Pierre Bayle* (Amsterdam: Z. Chatelain, 1750-6), Vol. III, s.v. "Postel," 215-36.

²*The Bahir*, ed. and trans. Aryeh Kaplan (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 39. See also Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Tree that is All: Jewish-Christian Roots of a Kabbalistic Symbol in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 3 (1993), 70.

³Letter to Masius of May 19, 1549, in Chauffepié, *Nouveau dictionnaire*, Vol.III, 220.

He had met Joanna in 1547 at the Hospital of Saints John and Paul in Venice, where he was working as a chaplain and where she had spent many years caring for the ill. He was impressed not only with her selfless devotion to others but also with her piety, her asceticism and particularly her spiritual insight, which astounded him in a woman with no formal education. Moreover, he became convinced that she possessed the gift of prophecy. She foretold the beginning of a new age, with a reformed Church, a united world religion and the moral perfection of all humanity.⁴ According to Postel, Joanna proclaimed herself and him, whom she called her spiritual son, to be the heralds of this new age.

Postel's encounter with Joanna would become the single most important event of his life. The belief that Christ had appeared on earth as a woman would become the focal point of Postel's unusual prophecy. He combined what he learned from Joanna with concepts he had already formulated regarding the structure of the universe and the history of the world. His synthesis became a curious blend of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, Jewish and Christian thought, and religious and nationalistic sentiment.⁵

⁴A summary of Joanna's prophecies is provided by Marion Leathers Kuntz in "The Virgin of Venice and Concepts of the Millennium in Venice," *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, eds. J.R. Brink et al., (Kirkville: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1989), 123.

⁵He was also familiar with Islam and was influenced by it, although to a lesser extent than Judaism. However, Muslim influence on his thought lies beyond the scope of this study.

Postel believed that he had a mission to publicize his prophecy. Between 1549 and 1551, he made some attempts to discuss his ideas, evident in his letter to Masius and in his translation of the *Sefer ha-Bahir*.⁶ However, it was only after 1551 that his missionary efforts crystallized. Upon learning of Joanna's recent death, Postel had what he described as a mystical experience, during which he lay in a type of coma for several weeks while the spirit of Joanna entered his body.⁷ It was after this event, which he considered his commissioning as a prophet, that he began to write about Joanna. In 1553 he published *Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde*, which was thinly disguised as a contribution to the current debate on women but concluded with his prophecy of the New Eve.⁸ He also published two accounts in Italian in 1555, in which he provided fuller details of their relationship and Joanna's prophecy.⁹ Mother Joanna, as he called her, was also discussed or at least mentioned in many of his other books and

⁶François Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et de Renaissance*, 35 (1973), 88 [hereafter abbreviated as *BHR*].

⁷On this period in Postel's life, see Marion Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel: Prophet of the Restitution of All Things* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 104.

⁸*Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde suivi de la doctrine du siècle doré* (Paris: J. Ruelle, 1553); it exists in a modern reprint edited by Gustave Brunet (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970).

⁹*Il Libro della divina ordinatione* (Padua: Perchacino, 1555). *Le Prime nove de l'altro mondo* (printed by the author, 1555). A French translation exists of the latter by Henri Morard, *La vierge vénitienne* (Paris: Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1928).

unpublished treatises, including his translations of Jewish mystical texts, which he believed to contain direct references to her.

To suggest that Jesus had reappeared as a female messiah was obviously heretical, but other components of Postel's theology were also suspect, such as his use of Jewish and Muslim religious texts. The Inquisition was suspicious of Postel's radical ideas for church reform and his books were included in the Catalogue of Prohibited Books drawn up by papal legate Filippe Archinto in 1544.¹⁰ In 1551 the Council of Trent condemned not only everything he had ever written, but also anything that he might ever write in the future.¹¹ Postel's persistence in broadcasting his message quite understandably led to censure. *Les très merueilleuses victoires* had an immediately hostile reception. An anonymous tract described Postel as one of the "... most wicked and arrogant men whom the earth has ever borne"¹² In 1555, the Venetian Inquisition placed Postel's books on the Index and when he voluntarily appeared before them to defend himself, the Inquisitors concluded that if Postel was not a heretic, he was surely insane. A few months

¹⁰Marion Kuntz, "Lodovico Domenichi, Guillaume Postel and the Biography of Giovanna Veronese," *Studi Veneziani*, n.s. 16 (1988), 41-2.

¹¹Jean de La Fosse, *Journal d'un curé ligueur de Paris sous les trois derniers Valois*, ed. Edouard de Barthélemy (Paris: Didier, 1866), 157-8. Postel was struck by the illogic behind such a decision. See his "Livre des retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.2v.

¹²*Ad principes christianos cohortatio pacificatoria* (Lyon: J. de Tournes, 1555), 18. "Postellum illum dico, omnium hominum quos unquam terra tulit sceleratissimum atque audacissimum ..."

later, he was imprisoned in Rome and remained there until 1559. Even after his release, he continued to preach his message. In 1563, the Parliament of Paris charged him with disturbing the peace with his public preaching and ordered that he be placed under house arrest in the Monastery of St. Martin des Champs in Paris, where he stayed until his death in 1581.

What is surprising is that given his unusual prophecy, Postel was not burned at the stake and, even after being placed in the monastery, seems to have been allowed considerable freedom. It may be that the verdict of insanity pronounced by the Inquisition was actually a way to protect him from outright condemnation as a heretic.¹³ For Postel was a respected scholar, and one of the greatest authorities of his day on semitic languages and cultures.¹⁴ His scholarship was reluctantly admitted by all who knew him, even by those who called him a heretic or lunatic. The consensus of the scholarly community was that Postel was extremely learned and intelligent but that his attention had

¹³William Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 22.

¹⁴Kuntz points out that he was acquainted with relatively obscure religious groups such as the Druzes, the Maronites and the Caraites. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 95. There is also evidence that had some knowledge of Hinduism. See Antoine Du Verdier, *Prosopographie ou description des personnes illustres, tant chrestiennes que prophanes* (Lyons: Paul Frelon, 1605), 2531.

been diverted into frivolous and dangerous areas, primarily due to his dabbling in Jewish esoterica.¹⁵

In a century which produced not only Luther and Calvin, but also Muntzer, Schwenckfeld and Joris, unorthodox religious characters were commonplace. Even so, Postel evoked both admiration and invective more than most. François Secret, one of the leading historians of Postel, has called him "a mirror of this complicated century."¹⁶ Postel's reputation as a scholar warranted inclusion in most of the major biographical dictionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁷ He was cited as an authority on

¹⁵A representative opinion is provided by Jacques Gaultier in his *Table chronologique de l'estat du christianisme depuis la naissance de Jesus-Christ, jusques à l'année MDCXII* (Lyons: Jacques Roussin, 1613), 557: "Guillaume Postel tres versé es Langues et Mathematiques, mais suspect et censuré en ses livres pour ses vaines curiositez et fausses imaginations."

¹⁶François Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964), ix.

¹⁷André Thevet, *Les vrais portraits et vies des hommes illustres* (Paris: I. Kervert and Guillaume Chaudiere, 1584), 588-590v; [La Popelinière] Lancelot Voisin, *L'histoire des histoires avec l'idée de l'histoire accomplie* (Paris: Marc Orry, 1599; reprint, Paris: Fayard, 1989), 360-64; Sieur de la Croix-du-Maine, *La bibliotheque du sieur de la Croix-du-Maine, qui est un catalogue general de toutes sortes d'auteurs* (Paris: Abel l'Angelier, 1584), 483-6; Du Verdier, *Prosopographie*, 2531-2; Scevole de Sainte-Marthe, *Eloges des hommes illustres, qui depuis un siecle ont fleury en France dans la profession des lettres* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville et al, 1644), 295-8; Paul Colomies, *Gallia orientalis sive gallorum qui linguam hebraeam vel alias orientales excoluerunt vitae* (The Hague: Adriani Ulacq, 1665), 57-62; Isaac Bullart, *Academie des sciences et des arts, contenant les vies, et les eloges historiques des hommes illustres* (Brussels: François Foppens, 1682), vol. I, 297-9; Antoine Teissier, *Les eloges des hommes scavans tirez de l'histoire de M. de Thou*, 2nd ed. (Utrecht: François Halma, 1697), Vol. II, 47-52; Adrien Baillet, *Des enfans devenus celebres par leurs etudes ou par leurs écrits, traité historique* (Paris: Antoine Dezallier, 1688), 440-3.

linguistics, cosmology and geography.¹⁸ He was the object of praise in one of the poems of the French poet, Jean de la Gessée.¹⁹ His friends and supporters acknowledged his intellectual genius and personal amicability, and quietly disregarded or excused his religious views.²⁰ Florimond de Raemon, a convert to Catholicism from Protestantism, was his strongest defender and called him "the greatest soul and rarest mind that our age has produced."²¹

At the same time, however, Postel received a great deal of negative attention. He was attacked in polemical writings and included in catalogues of heretics.²² He was condemned by those on all sides of the religious spectrum, by Catholics such as the Dutch Inquisitor, Guillaume Lindan, and

¹⁸Theodore Bibliander, *De ratione communi omnium linguarum et literatum commentarius* (Frosch: Tiguri apud Christoph, 1548), 4-5. See also Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 21 (1959), 457.

¹⁹Jean de la Gessée, *Les jeunesses*, ed. Guy Demerson (Paris: S.T.F.M., 1991), 73.

²⁰One of his disciples, Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, diplomatically suggested that Postel had retracted any of his ideas which went counter to orthodox doctrine. See François Secret, "Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie représentant de G. Postel à la Polyglotte d'Anvers," *De Gulden Passer*, 44 (1966), 245-57.

²¹Florimond de Raemon, *L'histoire de la naissance, progresz et decadence de l'heresie de ce siecle* (Rouen: Thomas Dare, 1623), 227. "Je veux venger l'injure faicte à cet homme, qu'ils marquent comme un Athee (à la verité la plus grand ame, et l'esprit le plus rare que nostre aage ait produit)..."

²²Peder Palladius, *Catalogus aliquot haeresium huius aetatis et earum refutatio* (Wittenberg: Petri Setzii, [1557]); [Antoine] Couillard, Sieur du Pavillon, *Les contredicts du seigneur du Pavillon, les Lorriz, en Gastinois, aux faulses et abusifes propheties de Nostradamus et autres astrologues* (Paris: Charles l'Anglier, 1560).

Protestants like the French Calvinist, Theodore Beza.²³ Postel's reputation as a heretic was even used in polemical works to discredit the Jesuits in France, because he had been associated with them for a few months in 1544.²⁴

Considering the amount of interest that Postel attracted from his peers, the attention he has received from the modern historical community has been surprisingly scant. Most histories of the Renaissance or Reformation devote only a few lines to him, remarking upon his eccentricity. He is occasionally mentioned in histories of geography and linguistics as having made contributions in these fields. The body of twentieth-century literature devoted exclusively to Postel is limited to several monographs and approximately fifty articles.

The main direction of historical scholarship devoted to Postel thus far has been that of bibliographical and prosopographical research.²⁵ François

²³R.P. Guillaume Lindan, *Discours en forme de dialogue ... en laquelle est nayvement depeinte et descrite la source, origine, cause et progres des troubles, partialitez et differens qui durent encores aujourd'hui, meuz par Luther, Calvin et leurs conjurez et partizans contre l'Eglise Catholique* (Paris: Guillaume Chaudiere, 1566), 80-80v. Théodore de Bèze, *Histoire ecclesiastique des eglises reformees au royaume de France* (Anvers: Jean Remy, 1580), 87-8.

²⁴Estienne Pasquier, *Les recherches de la France* [1560] (Paris: Laurens Sonnius, 1621), 337. Pierre Jurieu, the seventeenth-century Calvinist, also used Postel as an example of the worst sort of heresy that the Jesuits could produce. Pierre Jurieu, *Histoire du Calvinisme et celle du Papisme* (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1683), 132-4.

²⁵Postel's writings have been catalogued in two bibliographies: François Secret, *Bibliographie des manuscrits de Guillaume Postel* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970) and Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel publiés en France et leurs éditeurs, 1538-1579* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992).

Secret has devoted many years to detailed archival research on Postel. His main contribution has been in the editing and publication of primary source material.²⁶ Secret has also traced many biographical details of Postel's life, uncovering his relations with his contemporaries through correspondence. Secret's "Notes sur Guillaume Postel" published in the *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance* periodically between 1958 and 1973 are invaluable in this regard. He has examined Postel's influence and his circle of followers, especially his relationship with the brothers Guy and Nicolas Le Fèvre de la Boderie, who were among his friends and students.²⁷

Biographical information on Postel has been greatly enhanced through the research of William Bouwsma and Marion Kuntz, who have each published monographs on Postel.²⁸ William Bouwsma's work, based on his doctoral thesis, is an intellectual biography which attempts to find a coherent message

²⁶*Guillaume Postel, 1510-1581 et son interprétation du candelabre de Moysè* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1966); *Le trésor des prophéties de l'univers* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1969); *Guillaume Postel. Apologies and Rétractions* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1972); *Postelliana* (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1981). As well, many of Secret's articles contain extracts or complete transcripts of unpublished items. Other historians who have published Postel's manuscripts are Claude-Gilbert Dubois and Irena Backus. See Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois au XVI^e siècle: Le développement littéraire d'un mythe nationaliste avec l'édition critique d'un traité inédit de Guillaume Postel: De ce qui est premier pour réformer le monde*, (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, J. Vrin, 1972) and *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese: De summopere (1566) et Le miracle de Laon (1566)*, ed. Irena Backus (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1995).

²⁷François Secret, *L'ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969).

²⁸Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi*; Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*.

among Postel's wide-ranging interests. Bouwsma argues that Postel's main concern was to develop a solution to world conflict and division. Bouwsma relates Postel's intellectual pursuits to his temperament and suggests that Postel was responding to the breakdown of social and religious institutions in the early sixteenth century, a concept which Bouwsma develops in later works.²⁹ Themes which are less developed by Bouwsma, however, are Postel's relationship with Joanna and his use of female symbolism, particularly in relation to Judaism. Since publishing his work in 1957, Bouwsma has moved into other areas of sixteenth-century history and left Postellian research to others.

Marion Kuntz has been the most prolific Postellian scholar in recent years. She has organized two international conferences on Postel, held in Avranches in 1981 and in Venice in 1982, whose proceedings have both been published.³⁰ One focus of her scholarship has been on examining the relationship between Postel and Joanna. She has been the first to find evidence beyond that in Postel's writings that his Mother Joanna was in fact a real person.³¹ Based on archival research in Venice, Kuntz was positively able to identify her as one Giovanna, or in the Venetian dialect Zuana, who

²⁹See, for example, William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

³⁰*Guillaume Postel, 1581-1981. Actes du colloque*, eds. J.-F. Maillard and J. Simmonet (Paris: Editions de la Maisnie, 1985) and *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, ed. Marion Kuntz (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1988).

³¹Kuntz, "Lodovico Domenichi," 35.

worked in a hospital in Venice.³² She is therefore the first historian to try to examine Joanna herself as a historical figure.³³

In general, research to date has laid solid biographical groundwork for further examination of Postel's ideas; there is considerable documentation for his whereabouts and activities during his lifetime. However, those historians who have studied him in the most depth continue to flesh out the biographical details of his life rather than interpret his ideas. Those who do examine his thought have focussed on the most tangible aspects of his broadly-based pursuits, such as his interest in languages, politics or in biblical studies.³⁴ So the state of Postellian research remains largely at the level of biography, rather than that of the analysis of his thought.

One reason why the historical research has taken this direction is due in part to the style and content of Postel's writings. He produced approximately seventy books and has left numerous manuscripts in the libraries of Europe, so there is considerable material in terms of volume. However, much of his writing is extremely repetitive. Reading through his works can be tedious, as the same ideas, even the same sentences, emerge over and over. Some of the stylistic elements of his writing are typical of sixteenth-

³²Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 73-4.

³³In this regard, see Kuntz, "The Virgin of Venice," 113-30.

³⁴The papers presented at the two international conferences devoted to Postel tend to revolve around these themes.

century scholarship, yet he is verbose even by early modern standards.³⁵ His method of argumentation is based on analogy rather than logic. His prose is not only unwieldy, but laced with esoteric meanings and multi-layered symbols. All of these factors combine to make Postel's writings less accessible than that of some of his contemporaries. In the preface to her biography of Postel, Marion Kuntz states that she has focussed on establishing the details of his life rather than examining his thought because after fifteen years of immersion in his writings, she still finds him elusive.³⁶

It is important to recognize that Postel's writing style reflects the structure of his thought and is itself a point of entry into his mental world. Another feature of Postel's writing which resists systematic analysis is his method of argumentation. Postel worked with a highly-developed system of categories. In his mind, a fact was true if it fit into one of his schemata.³⁷ Because all of the components of the universal order were interrelated, he considered analogy to be a legitimate form of proof. He made leaps of logic

³⁵Albert-Henry de Sallengre describes Postel's writing style as typically scholastic: "Il s'exprime selon les idées de la philosophie scholastique, c'est-à-dire, d'une manière fort obscure pour la plupart des lecteurs qui n'entendent pas ce jargon." *Memoires de litterature*. Vol. I. (The Hague: Henri du Sauzet, 1715), 33.

³⁶Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, xi-xii.

³⁷See, for example, his *Tabula restitutionis omnium constitutionem naturalium et super naturalium rerum, quatuor elementis in sensum et intellectum humanum conducendarum, ad perfectissimam Divinae Bonitatis admirationem* (n.p., [1552]) (bound with other short tracts of Postel as *Tracts* in the British Library).

which surprise the modern reader, because he began with his conclusions and developed analogies to support them. In fact, for Postel, such a form of argument was more than analogy; it was an actual description of reality, built on a belief in the analogous structure of the spiritual and material worlds.

However, while many of his allusions and associations are obscure, his writing is characterized by a certain consistency of message. Indeed, the volume of his corpus is mitigated by the redundancy of ideas. This repetitiveness is in itself significant for understanding Postel's message. One striking aspect of his writing is that, in spite of the fact that his books span a period of forty years, he reveals a remarkable consistency in terms of his world view and his specific message. This is not to say that there were not internal inconsistencies to his thought, but when there were, Postel seems to have been aware of them and worked to reconcile conflicting ideas. This attribute is particularly significant when the wide variety of topics which he addressed is taken into account; he wrote not only theological works but books on history, geography, philology, and cosmology. His writings reveal a man who was driven by what he perceived as a divine purpose and a messianic message, and a mind that was at the same time knowledgeable in diverse areas, but obsessive in its single-mindedness.

Historians have had difficulty knowing how to interpret Guillaume Postel and his unusual prophecy. The assessment of Claude Postel is typical; that is, if he was not insane, he was at least obsessively connected to his

ideas.³⁸ The earliest psychological profile of Postel, which dates from the sixteenth century, suggests that he had delusions of grandeur, which the author attributed to a melancholic disposition.³⁹ From his own time to this one, Postel has been the subject of sporadic attempts at psychological analysis, by both historians and psychiatrists, most of whom addressed the issue of insanity.⁴⁰ Some historians point to characteristics in Postel such as hallucinations, delusions of grandeur and paranoia as possible indications of his instability. His insanity is often assumed by the wider community of scholars.⁴¹ Some have suggested that he became progressively more unstable as he experienced hardship and instability in his material life.⁴² However, those historians who have delved most deeply into his writings tend to be more

³⁸Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel*, Bk.2, 4.

³⁹Noel Taillepied, *Psychologie, ou traité de l'apparition des esprits* (Paris: Guillaume Bichon, 1588), 26-7.

⁴⁰Gérard-François Lebigot, "La fureur de Guillaume Postel (Etude d'un paraphrène au XVI^e siècle)" (Doctoral thesis, University of Bordeaux, 1967); M. Sendrail, "Un réformateur sous le regard des psychiatres," *Le concours médical*, 41 (1969), 7060; J. Simonnet, "Guillaume Postel: rêve, délire, illumination?" *L'Information psychiatrique*, 55, no.1 (1979), 53-64; Claude-Gilbert Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques de la sexualité dans la pensée de Guillaume Postel," *Etudes françaises*, 4, no.2 (1969), 184-5 and Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois*, 55.

⁴¹For example, Lucien Febvre states: "... he was an unbalanced genius, partly a visionary, partly a raving lunatic ..." Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 112.

⁴²Lebigot, "La fureur de Guillaume Postel," 138. "L'insécurité, l'instabilité, l'incertitude, nées d'une personnalité conflictuelle fragile, ... ont progressivement poussé Postel dans le délire."

circumspect in their conclusions. William Bouwsma concludes that the intellectual coherence of Postel's thought reflects a mind that was more or less stable and that "Postel's thought, even in its most extreme aspects, cannot simply be dismissed as some curious private delusion."⁴³ Marion Kuntz similarly refrains from an indictment of insanity.⁴⁴ It may be that acquaintance with the complexity of his writings makes one approach them with more caution and that the remarkable consistency of his message evokes at least grudging respect. A defense of Postel's sanity is provided by Daniel Restoux, who argued that had he been truly insane, he would have not been able to move in the intellectual circles in which he did, collect a group of followers, nor find publishers for his books.⁴⁵

The greatest difficulty in understanding Postel results from the clash between a religious and secular view of the world. Postel believed that he was a prophet. Therefore, the historian must try to understand rationally ideas and claims that are not in themselves rational. On numerous occasions, Postel stated that he had received direct communication from God, Jesus or angels.⁴⁶ As early as 1543, even prior to meeting Joanna, he believed that his writings

⁴³Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 144.

⁴⁴Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 172.

⁴⁵Daniel Restoux, *Guillaume Postel: Apôtre de la concorde du monde* (Mortain: G. Latellier, 1931), 110-1.

⁴⁶For example, see the conclusion to his preface in *De nativitate mediatoris ultima* (n.p., 1546), 11.

had been guided by direct inspiration from Jesus or the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ He suggested that a divine voice directed him to approach Francis I with a proclamation that the King had a duty to reform the Church, defeat the Turks, and rule the world.⁴⁸ In 1551 Postel reported having a vision of Hebrew letters in the sky which revealed to him the mysteries of the universe.⁴⁹

It is Postel's spiritualism that poses a problem for the modern historian. Whether his visions and prophecies should be labelled insane is perhaps a matter of opinion. Furthermore, the attempt to determine a person's sanity is difficult, probably impossible for the historian in most cases. Finally, such a question is perhaps of value in coming to grips with Postel himself, but is less relevant to an attempt to place Postel in his time. A more fruitful line of inquiry and one with greater significance for sixteenth-century history as a whole is the extent to which Postel's thought was a product of his own time. One can read texts as products of individuals, but also as products of individuals who are a part of the historical discourse of their time. The

⁴⁷"Livre des retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.18v and *La loy salique* (Paris: [Sebastian Nivelles], 1552), Chapter XVI.

⁴⁸*Le thrésor des propheties*, 172-3. See also Secret's publication of the British Library's Sloane ms.1413 in "Paralipomènes de la vie de François Ier par Guillaume Postel," *Studi francesi*, 2 (1958), 50-62.

⁴⁹*Abrahami patriarchae liber Jezirah* (Paris: n.p., 1552). For a discussion of this event, see François des Billons, *Nouveaux éclaircissements sur la vie et les ouvrages de Guillaume Postel* (Liège: J.J. Tutot, 1773; reprint, Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), 39 and Richard Simon, *Bibliothèque critique* (Amsterdam: Jean Louis de Lormes, 1708), Vol. II, 234-6.

questions to ask of Postel are how the climate in which he lived formed his thought, how he responded to it and how he was understood in his time.⁵⁰

Such an approach is particularly relevant to the texts of a figure such as Postel, who was considered in his own time to be marginal. The tension between individual religious beliefs and the social context in which they are formed reveals a great deal historically and is particularly relevant for the sixteenth century, when the spectrum of religious expression became much wider than at any earlier time in the history of Christianity. The interplay between the individual and his environment is particularly exciting when the texts have been written by someone who was not bound by the constraints of orthodoxy. However, in spite of the uniqueness of Postel's theology regarding a female messiah and his belief in himself as a prophet, his ideas were not created in a vacuum. He was responding to the concerns of his age and borrowed ideas from those around him and those who preceded him.

Postel's essentially magical view of the world was in many ways not unusual for the sixteenth century; belief in the supernatural was the norm rather than the exception. The predominant view of history was that God was

⁵⁰This approach draws on the work of Donald Kelley, who examines the interaction between the individual as a conscious agent and wider societal forces. He describes his method as a movement "... from the examination of particular personalities, experiences, events and institutions toward more general historical patterns, and so to reach for some of the human meanings of the historical process in the sixteenth century. The direction is from history as synecdoche, then to history as structure." Donald Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9.

in control and that events on earth were caused or at least directed by events in the heavens. Moreover, as a Renaissance intellectual Postel was influenced by Neoplatonism; he believed in a hierarchical structure of the universe as a divinely-ordered cosmos.⁵¹ For Neoplatonists, the visible, material world mirrored the invisible, heavenly realm and access to God and to divine mysteries was considered to be possible through learning to decode the signs in the material world which pointed to the heavens. Such was the mindset which inspired the magical world view of those like Postel, Paracelsus and Agrippa and many others throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵²

However, this is not to say that the magical view of the world went unchallenged even in the sixteenth century. Machiavelli's *Prince* was revolutionary in its perspective that history did not necessarily unfold as God ordained. Along with many others of his time, Postel was outraged at such a claim and he argued that Machiavellians should be killed as traitors.⁵³ Postel's entire perspective was threatened by the notion that human activities had

⁵¹For example, see Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (New York: Ark, 1983); *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (London: Golden Cockerell Press, 1988) and Brian P. Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition in Renaissance France* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978).

⁵²Postel is studied within the context of the occultist tradition by François Secret in *Hermétisme et Kabbale* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1992), 119 ff.

⁵³*L'histoire memorable des expeditions depuys le deluge faictes par les Gauloys ou Francoys* (Paris: Sebastian Nivelles, 1552), fol.63v.

human causes, that not all was governed by the hand of God. As far as he was concerned, the whole universe was under God's guidance and control.

Moreover, Postel's faith in God's direct revelation to individuals was not an unquestioned assumption and was a point of controversy among the reformers. In his own time, Postel's brand of mystical spirituality was uncommon and few took his claims seriously. Postel was himself aware that his faith in divine revelation was not unchallenged. In one of his many retractions, he explains that the direct access to the Holy Spirit which he experienced was something that all Christians could share if they understood the nature of God.⁵⁴ He felt that his generation was basically corrupt and that few had a true understanding of the nature of reality. It is the dynamic between Postel's views and those of his contemporaries which allows us to understand Postel's thought.

Postel believed that if the Church understood reality in the same way he did, it would come to see that his prophecy was consistent with Catholic teaching. He took literally the beliefs of the Church in angels, resurrection, transubstantiation and God's involvement in the world. He was convinced that there was an intimate connection between the visible and invisible worlds. He upheld what could be seen as the inheritance of the medieval Church with its basically magical view of the world. In this sense, Postel can be seen as maintaining those beliefs of the late medieval Church which were starting to

⁵⁴"Livre des retractions," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.19v.

be challenged in the sixteenth century. This suggests that an appropriate forum for an examination of Postel's thought is that of the tension between Reformation and Counter-Reformation theologies. Surprisingly little research has been done on Postel from this perspective. He has generally been studied as a Renaissance intellectual or a Kabbalist rather than as a participant in Reformation controversy.

In the broadest terms, the Reformation can be understood as a period of widespread social instability which partly manifested itself in the breakdown of the unity of the Church. Luther's emphasis on the sanctity of the individual conscience was more than a theological revelation; it had serious social and political ramifications.⁵⁵ One of the major characteristics of the sixteenth century was the breakdown of religious authority and the ensuing conflict between those who desired to retain an authoritative, hierarchical structure and those who sought to escape it.

The tension between Postel's faith in the Church as an institution invested with God's authority to rule and his criticism of it for failing to fulfill its mandate on earth is a recurrent feature of his writings. He sought to uphold the authority of the Church, but to criticize it as well. In his mind, it was his spiritualism, his direct connection to God, which gave him the right to undertake both simultaneously. It is this tension between individual belief

⁵⁵Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 58.

and the institution that makes Postel's thought so intriguing and why a study of it can contribute to an understanding of the sixteenth century in general.

Mystics have usually been viewed with scepticism by the Church, at least initially, because the belief in direct revelation is potentially dangerous to the institution. There is a continual dialectic operating between the Church as institution and the believing individual within it. Yet it is the belief system itself which admits the possibility of divine inspiration. What is interesting about Postel is that he was neither completely condemned as a heretic nor accepted as a mystic. In this uncertain time, Postel was a liminal figure.

Steven Katz argues that mysticism is essentially conservative because mystics generally operate within the doctrinal paradigms of the established religion.⁵⁶ Christian mystics have visions which use Christian symbols and often refer or relate to specific doctrines. Mystics often try to validate their experience by placing it within the context of orthodox authorities, by appealing to the character of Elijah, for example.⁵⁷ Katz's analysis sheds some light on Postel as a mystic. In Postel one can see the extreme tension between one who is anxious to remain orthodox but at the same time believes himself to have received a new and personal revelation.

⁵⁶Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3-60.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

Postel's critique of the Church combined strong Gallican elements with a criticism of the corruption of the papacy; he could be as fervent as Savonarola and as sarcastic and venomous as Luther. At the same time, however, Postel maintained a position of faith in the authority of the Church. Moreover, he defended those aspects of Catholic belief which were being challenged, such as the sacramental nature of the Eucharist, the importance of celibacy and the veneration of Mary as an intercessor. In spite of his criticism of the Pope, Postel can be portrayed as an avid participant in the Catholic Reformation and defender of Catholic doctrine.

The recently-published *Histoire du Christianisme* discusses Postel in a section entitled: "Beyond Catholicism and Protestantism?"⁵⁸ It suggests that Postel is difficult to classify as a Catholic because of his relationship with Protestants and radical reformers such as Bullinger and Schwenckfeld. It is certainly the case that Postel had congenial relations with some radical Protestants, particularly those who believed in direct communication with God. His relations with them generally revolved around an interest in Jewish texts and their publication. Those Protestants who formed a circle around the publishers Oporin, Pellican and Bomberg were generally favourable to Postel

⁵⁸ "Au-delà du Catholicisme et du Protestantisme? Thames, Velsius, Postel, Bodin et les autres." *Histoire du Christianisme*, eds. J.-M. Mayer, Ch. and L. Pietri, A. Vauchez and M. Venard, Vol. VIII: *Le temps des confessions (1530-1620)* (Paris: Desclée, 1992), 173.

and he to them.⁵⁹ A letter from Postel to Pellican from 1553 mentions Bullinger, Bibliander, Oporin and Bomberg.⁶⁰

However, Postel was not favourable to all Protestants and in fact his most bitter enemies were Calvinists: Theodore Beza, Lambert Daneau, Pierre Viret, Flaccius Illyricus, Matthew d'Antoine and Henri Estienne all attacked him in their writings.⁶¹ Postel's dislike of them is found throughout his manuscripts and in his letters to Masius.⁶² It is not certain whether Calvin and Postel ever met, although they had mutual acquaintances in people such as Marguerite of Navarre and Guillaume Budé.⁶³ It is clear that Postel's most devout followers were all Catholics, themselves with mystical inclinations, such

⁵⁹Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 111-2.

⁶⁰"Anekdotia de Guilelmo Postello," *Museum Helveticum ad juvandos literas in publicos*, Vol. XXVIII (Turici: Litteris Conradi Orelli & Soc., 1753), 653-8.

⁶¹Matthieu d'Antoine, *Réponse aux rêveries et hérésies de Guillaume Postel, cosmopolite* (Lyon: Jean Saugran, 1563); Henri Estienne, *L'introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes* (Geneva: n.p., 1566), 121-4; Flaccius Illyricus, *Epistola Guilelmi Postelli ad C. Schwenckfeldium cum Praefatione M. Mattiae Flaccii Illyrici* (Geneva: Christianus Rhodius, 1566); Lambert Daneau, *D. Aurelii Augustini enchiridion ad Laurentium, sive summa et praecipua totius Christianae religionis capita* (Geneva: Eustatius Vignon, 1575), 116; De Bèze, *Histoire ecclesiastique*, 87-8.

⁶²Postel stated his opinion regarding Calvin in a letter to Masius, February 24, 1555. Chauffepié, *Dictionnaire historique*, Vol. III, 229. He discussed his views of Illyricus in greater detail, in 1563. *Ibid.*, 225. Postel's relationship with Daneau is discussed by Secret in "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 23 (1961), 128.

⁶³John Lee Thompson, *John Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah: Women in Regular and Exceptional Roles in the Exegesis of Calvin, his Predecessors, and his Contemporaries* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1992), 46.

as Guy and Nicholas Le Fèvre de la Boderie, Florimond de Raemon, Vincent Cossard and Blaise de Vigenère. His circle of followers has been characterized as participants in Counter-Reformation spirituality.⁶⁴ An examination of both Postel's followers and his thought itself suggests that his interests were more consistent with Catholic doctrine than historians have indicated. A detailed examination of Postel's ideas, in the context of that of his contemporaries, will demonstrate the depth of Catholic orthodoxy in this supposed heretic.

The first step in such an analysis is an examination of Postel's thought in itself. The question of its internal coherence must be addressed. It will also be necessary to examine the interplay between political and religious beliefs in his writings. One important dynamic in his writing is the relationship between the intellectual and the emotional realms. In order to understand the meaning of Postel's religious views, they cannot be seen as simply a constructed philosophical system, but as a system which resonated with his own emotional makeup.

It is clear from Postel's writing that he dealt with both intellectual and emotional issues in the same way, through the development of an internally coherent system of thought. Postel held philosophical positions which were consistent with the psychological needs to which they corresponded. His system can be regarded as basically mythical, a masterful attempt at

⁶⁴Jean-François Maillard, "Postel et ses disciples normands," in *Guillaume Postel 1581-1981. Actes du colloque*, 85.

interweaving disparate elements of religious, political, and historical thought into a tapestry which, in Postel's mind, had overall rational coherence.⁶⁵ It is therefore necessary to unravel some of the threads of his thought.

This requires an examination of the content of his ideas, his language, and the structure of his arguments. An awareness of Postel's understanding of the allegorical nature of reality is of seminal importance in interpreting his thought. Much of his writing is based on argument from analogy and allegory. In his biography of Postel, William Bouwsma suggests that "Postel, though he wrote at times like a philosopher, was constantly attempting to maintain the connection between reason and myth, between scholarship and popular belief."⁶⁶ Bouwsma attributes this characteristic feature of Postel's writing to his knowledge of Jewish mysticism and cites Gershom Scholem in this regard.⁶⁷ In his work on the Jewish mystical tradition, Scholem analyzes the symbolic nature of the kabbalistic myth and argued that, while it is a philosophical system, it also deals with the most basic human fears and desires and thus bridges the gap between theology and popular belief.⁶⁸ Scholem sees Kabbalah, especially as it was developed in the *Zohar*, as an emotional response to

⁶⁵The term *mythical* is used here in a Jungian sense.

⁶⁶Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 41.

⁶⁷Gershom Scholem was the first historian to approach the Jewish mystical tradition in a serious manner. Nineteenth-century historians generally dismissed it as unworthy of scholarly attention.

⁶⁸Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 35.

philosophical problems. Postel's extensive use of Kabbalah reflects this same predisposition.

In the past, religious and intellectual historians tended to look at ideas as products of reason, rather than emotion. However, rational ideas of any sort are held emotionally at some level, if they are held with conviction. Religious ideas have a particularly strong emotional content, since they deal with one's sense of self and sense of place in the universe.⁶⁹ Certainly there are systematic theologians who construct rationally coherent systems. However, when one begins to explore the realm of personal spirituality one enters the realm of the symbolic. The fact that religion deals primarily at the level of the symbolic suggests that there is a close correlation between the subconscious and religious expression.⁷⁰ Recently, therefore, historians of religion have begun to recognize the psychological component of belief and have turned from the history of theology or doctrine to a more general cultural approach which examines the history of meaning and takes into account the

⁶⁹One of the first historians to discuss this concept was Lucien Febvre in his essay "Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past," originally published in 1941. Reprinted in *A New Kind of History from the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 12-26.

⁷⁰This was, of course, one of Carl Jung's main insights. For example, see C.G. Jung, "The Concept of Libido," *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia* (Collected Works, Vol. V), trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 135.

social and psychological component of religious systems.⁷¹ Such an approach is fruitful because the content of religious beliefs reveals something of the nature of the psychology of the people who held them and the culture in which they were formed. The sixteenth century is particularly appropriate for such an approach because the breakdown of religious uniformity meant that, in spite of efforts to control it, space was created for individual expression and for a greater diversity of opinions than in any previous era in the history of Christianity.

Within this context, the ideas of an individual who creates his own theology are more likely to reveal personal psychological needs than those of people who hold a belief simply because it is the convention of their time. The more forcefully a belief or idea is held, the more likely it corresponds to an emotional or psychological need. Postel is a fascinating example for his time in terms of the tension between his unique prophecy and his orthodox beliefs. His prophecy regarding Joanna was definitely unique and sheds light on his own psychology.⁷² However, his ideas intersected with those of his contemporaries and this reveals more about his time. He participated in the discussion of the religious, political and social issues of his day.

⁷¹This shift is outlined by William Bouwsma in "Intellectual History in the 1980s: From History of Ideas to History of Meaning," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), 279-91.

⁷²Interesting work has been done in this field by Claude-Gilbert Dubois, who has examined Postel's thought from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques," 171-207.

In order to understand the symbolic content of religious beliefs, there are two fundamental questions which must be asked: first, why specific ideas are believed, and second, why specific symbols are used to encompass those ideas. In terms of the content of belief, ideas are held, both individually or collectively, because of their utility. What is meant by this is not only utility in a materialistic sense, but in a psychological one.⁷³ The use of particular religious symbols hints at the underlying psychology. These two questions touch the realms of both individual and social psychology. Both individuals and groups try to create order from chaos. The individual tries to situate himself within the universe and society tries to organize itself to avoid interpersonal chaos. The function of symbols is therefore of primary importance at both the social and private level.

Such an approach to religious history differs considerably from older forms which were characterized by a focus on theological content and doctrinal division. One of the leading historians in the field of the history of spirituality as a form of cultural history is Caroline Bynum, who has done extensive work

⁷³William James was the pioneer in this field. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929). In his assessment of James, John Smith states: "It is impossible to exaggerate the influence which James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* has had on philosophical and psychological treatments of religion in this century." John Smith, "William James's Account of Mysticism: A Critical Appraisal" in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Katz, 247.

on late medieval female piety.⁷⁴ She describes her approach to the history of spirituality as:

... the study of how basic religious attitudes and values are conditioned by the society within which they occur. This new definition brings spirituality very close to what the school of French historians call *mentalité*; the "history of spirituality" becomes almost a branch of social history, deeply influenced by the work of structural-functionalist anthropologists and of phenomenologists of religion.⁷⁵

Bynum masterfully analyzes the content of religious belief in order to understand the culture in which it is expressed.

This approach is also distinct from that type of history which is based on the application of psychoanalytic theory to history. Bynum rejects a wholesale application of Freudian theory to the study of history, particularly with relation to the analysis of symbols connected to women and sexuality.⁷⁶ She is critical of those who interpret Christian mysticism and piety solely as a sublimation or rechanneling of sexual desire. Rather, she argues for an approach which retains the integrity of the religious meaning for those who

⁷⁴One of Bynum's earliest works was *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). She has also examined the symbolism of food in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Her methodology is most clearly enunciated in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁷⁵Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 3.

⁷⁶Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 79, footnotes 26 and 27.

created and used symbols and dismisses as presentist a decoding of religious symbols in twentieth-century categories.⁷⁷

Bynum's cultural approach leads to conclusions which are important for an understanding of sixteenth-century religious developments as a reaction to medieval Christianity. Bynum's work focusses on the relationship between religious symbol and gender. She suggests that men and women have historically expressed their religious sentiments using different symbols.⁷⁸ The main thesis which runs through her works is that women provided a dynamic, creative force in late medieval piety. She argues that late-medieval religious symbolism was characterized by a sentimentality and physicality against which the Reformation reacted.⁷⁹ Bynum states: "The Reformation both continued and rejected the female piety of the late Middle Ages. What is certain is that the relationship needs to be studied."⁸⁰

Guillaume Postel, with his curious prophecy regarding Mother Joanna, his pervasive use of gender symbolism and his defense of Catholic notions of spirituality, becomes an ideal focus for the type of study which Bynum

⁷⁷Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 206.

⁷⁸This is her concern in her essay entitled "... And Woman his Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, eds. Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 278.

⁷⁹Bynum, "The Mysticism and Asceticism of Medieval Women: Some Comments on the Typologies of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch," in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 77.

⁸⁰Ibid., 78.

recommends. Through an examination of his theology and his symbols, it is possible to try to arrive at their meaning for him personally, but also to identify many concepts which were central to the religious controversies of the sixteenth century.

Postel's symbolism was primarily based on gender distinctions. The dichotomy between Male and Female underlay virtually every idea that he developed, whether it was specifically in regard to Joanna, or formed part of his broader concepts of the Church and the State or world geography and history. A gendered dichotomy was used to describe elements that were not even remotely sexual. For Postel, it even became a principle of linguistics and geography; for example, he believed that the world was divided into male and female regions and that the Hebrew language was male and Arabic was female.⁸¹ In his discussions of cosmology, Postel described the celestial sphere as male, the ether as female and the elemental world as filial or composite.⁸² Day was male and night, female. Faith was male and reason was female, because reason is a derivative of faith. Politically, Postel considered the Pope as a male figure and the King as female, because the Pope represented the heavenly rule and the King the earthly one. In every case, the meaning of

⁸¹"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr. 2113, fols.4 and 15v.

⁸²*La vierge vénitienne*, 19.

these terms was that what was labelled female was inferior to or derivative from what was called male.

Postel's symbolism was not original. Postel drew on a rich variety of traditions: Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, as well as hermetic and alchemical magic. The identification of the male as active and the female as passive is almost universal; such a paradigm can be found in both eastern and western thought. Therefore, it is difficult to determine which ideas are his own. What needs to be asked is why he drew on the traditions that he did. However, this does not reduce its centrality in his thought.

The significance of a study of Postel's gendered language extends beyond simply an analysis of Postel's thought in and of itself. When religious expression is gender specific, if God is Father or Mother, and sacred relationships are described in terms of family, a study of that imagery has important implications for historical gender analysis. The topic of women and gender was central to sixteenth-century French writers. The sixteenth century inherited the *querelle des femmes*, the debate over women, from the Middle Ages. The debate had been initiated with Jean de Meung's *Roman de la Rose*, whose views on women were challenged by Christine de Pisan and Jean Gerson.⁸³ In the sixteenth century, hundreds of books were written which addressed the topic of women, their role in society and their moral virtue.

⁸³*La querelle de la rose: Letters and Documents*, eds. Joseph L. Baird and John R. Kane (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 1978).

What one finds in this literature is a wide spectrum of responses to the question of female virtue. The traditional view, perpetuated by a church which prized celibacy, tended to see women as dangerous temptresses. This element reached its peak in those misogynistic tracts which fuelled the early modern witch craze, such as the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* of Kraemer and Sprenger. However, such misogynistic works also generated a reaction; other writers began to defend women and some went as far as to suggest that women were superior to men.⁸⁴

Most historians who have examined Postel have not studied him within the context of the *querelle des femmes*; there are surprisingly few articles on Postel's views on women.⁸⁵ Some of those who have made the attempt suggest that a comparison with other writers in the *querelle* is irrelevant, because Postel's religious views were so unusual as to preclude comparison.⁸⁶ It has

⁸⁴A useful and succinct introduction to the *querelle* literature is found in *Histoire du féminisme français, du Moyen Age à nos jours*, eds. Maïté and Daniel Armogathe (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1977), Chapter 4.

⁸⁵Michael Screech, "The Illusion of Postel's Feminism: A Note on the Interpretation of his *Très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du Nouveau Monde*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 16 (1953), 162-70; Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques," 171-207; J. Simmonet, "La mère du monde, miroir de la pensée de Guillaume Postel," in *Guillaume Postel, 1581-1981. Actes du colloque*, 17-22; Peter Redpath, "The Nature of Woman and her Role in Religion according to Guillaume Postel," in *Ibid.*, 137-49; Karl Faltenbacher, "Sur quelques aspects religieux de l'image de la femme chez Jean Bodin et Guillaume Postel," in *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, 317-24.

⁸⁶Emile Telle, *L'oeuvre de Marguerite d'Angoulême, reine de Navarre et la querelle des femmes* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1969), 66; Karl Faltenbacher, "Sur quelques aspects religieux," in *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, 321-2.

been widely assumed that Postel was a defender of women because of his preoccupation with ideas of gender. Michael Screech was the first to examine the issue in depth and he concluded that it is misleading to see Postel as defending women, because his entire system was based on women's ontological inferiority to men.⁸⁷ Screech thus claimed that Postel could not be considered to be defending women in the same way as other apologists of the *querelle*. While Screech's analysis succinctly differentiated Postel's allegorical language from his views of women's role in society, he failed to note a number of similarities in his philosophical position with that of other participants in the *querelle des femmes*. In a comparison with the neoplatonic stream in the *querelle*, Postel's views are remarkably similar. The Neoplatonists tended to use the same metaphors and symbols to describe women as Postel himself used.⁸⁸ While his prophecy was distinctive, Postel can be placed alongside other Catholic Neoplatonists, who began adapting the traditional Catholic view of women to shifting social mores.

⁸⁷Screech, "The Illusion of Postel's Feminism," 169.

⁸⁸Many Italian neoplatonic works were translated into French in the sixteenth century and they had considerable influence. Several were translated by Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, one of Postel's students: Marsilio Ficino's *Discours de l'honneste amour sur le banquet de Platon* (Paris: Jean Macé, 1578) and Francesco Giorgio's *L'harmonie du monde* (Paris: Jean Macé, 1578). Others include: Leon Ebreo, *Philosophie d'amour de M. Leon Hebreu*, trans. Denis Sauvage (Lyon: Benoist Rigaud, 1595); Leon Albert, *Hecatonphile* (Paris: Lucas Breyel, 1597); Angelo Firenzuola, *Discours de la beaute des dames*, trans. I. Pallet Saintongeois (Paris: Abel l'Angelier, 1578) and Alessandro Piccolomini, *Dialogues et devis des desmoiselles*, trans. François d'Amboise (Paris: Vincent Normant, 1581).

There were important social and economic factors which underlay the debate about women in sixteenth-century France. As a social group, it has been argued that women lost real power in the sixteenth century, which was reflected in the way they were portrayed symbolically.⁸⁹ In the last twenty years, historians have begun to examine the complex question of the status of women in the sixteenth century. While there is disagreement as to the details, it is generally well-accepted that a societal shift in attitudes toward women and the family took place in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁹⁰ The value of celibacy and the monastic ideal was increasingly replaced in society by a new emphasis on the value of marriage and the nuclear, paternalistic family. The family with father as the head became a symbol of the centralized state. There were varied and complex factors involved in this shift, which cannot be gone into detail here, such as a decline in respect for an increasingly weak and corrupt Church, the erosion of wider kinship ties due to economic pressures, increasing urbanization and the rise of a bourgeoisie.⁹¹ What is relevant to the current discussion is that such a shift occurred and had an enormous impact on the Church.

⁸⁹Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 75.

⁹⁰A useful introduction to this field is Merry E. Wiesner, *Women in the Sixteenth Century: A Bibliography* (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1983).

⁹¹*Le miroir des femmes*. Vol. I: *Moralistes et polémistes au XVI^e siècle*, eds. Luce Guillerm et al. (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983), 25.

The forum in which many gender issues were worked out was that of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The Protestant model established by Luther, who argued that few men possess the gift of celibacy, not only allowed the clergy to marry but infused marriage with the idea that the wife's role was seen more or less exclusively as domestic servant and helpmate. For Protestants, the purpose of marriage was companionship, not only procreation. Underlying such a change in perspective was a shift in attitudes toward women, marriage and sexuality. Luther considered marriage rather than virginity to be the highest calling and obedience of the wife to her husband replaced chastity as the highest virtue a woman could strive for.⁹² The issue of marriage was discussed not only in Catholic and Protestant polemic but was also at the heart of the writings of the *querelle des femmes*.⁹³

At the same time, the person of Mary and her place within Christianity was a point of controversy. While Protestants diminished her importance, Catholics reaffirmed their attachment to her in their attempt to retain a world view which was rapidly disappearing. Therefore the *querelle* cannot be understood purely in sociological terms as a debate over the role of women in society, but as intersecting with the Reformation debate over the person of Mary and the female saints. The use of Mary as an archetype, the Woman as

⁹²Merry Wiesner, "Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys," in *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, eds. J. Obelkevich et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 298.

⁹³*Le miroir des femmes*, Vol. I, 9.

a symbol of the perfect Christian being, was at the centre of religious polemic of the period.

This study of Postel's gender symbolism is an attempt to weave together threads that are not always found in the same fabric. In spite of new historiographical developments, the categories of historical analysis often remain more or less fixed. There is still a separation between historians of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and religious historians do not always take gender into account. Often, historians of *querelle* literature have tended to take an intellectual or literary approach, ignoring the religious polemic in many of the texts. Historians of Renaissance Neoplatonism have studied it as an intellectual phenomenon without addressing the issue of what human needs were responded to by the creation of such a system of thought.⁹⁴ Historians of the Catholic Reformation have ignored gender as having any real relation to their field.⁹⁵ Yet the issues of the use of Woman as a religious symbol, discussions of the moral nature of women and the fundamental beliefs of Christianity as they were understood in the sixteenth century are topics which are inherently intertwined.

⁹⁴William Bouwsma is a notable exception, however.

⁹⁵See, for example, *Catholicism in Early Modern History: A Guide to Research*, ed. John O'Malley (St. Louis: Center for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 1988). A notable exception is Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

This work is an attempt to analyze Postel's gender symbolism, its theological use, and its reception in the sixteenth century. While Postel's ideas were in many ways heretical, his basic position and inclinations supported the maintenance of Catholicism as he defined it, that is, as a universal church built on a spiritual foundation which corresponded to the heavenly realms. While his ideas were unique, many of his assumptions were shared by other Catholics, specifically, those French Neoplatonists who, inspired by their Italian forerunners, participated in the debate over women.

The general questions which underlie this study are: How are Woman, Femaleness, and Femininity symbolized in the writings of the sixteenth century? What function did this symbolism fulfill for the men who employed it? And finally, how is the Renaissance debate over women, which was almost purely abstract, related to the contemporaneous Reformation controversies?

The analysis will begin with a general introduction to Guillaume Postel, his life and thought, with an interest in how his ideas were related to the events of his life. As well as being a prophet and mystic, Postel was also a linguist, mathematician, geographer and astronomer. During his life he produced scores of books and left unpublished manuscripts on every conceivable area of Renaissance learning. His education and travels led him to incorporate many different streams of thought into his own.

In spite of the diversity of subject matter, Postel's writings are characterized by an internal coherence of thought. His theology in turn

reflects a basic psychological tendency to find comfort in a figure good enough to be worshipped, but close enough to be merciful. For Postel, this was primarily a maternal figure. Postel used gender terminology as a metaphor for virtually everything he discussed, whether it be in the realm of linguistics, geography, cosmology, philosophy or political theory. Therefore, in order to understand his symbolism, an overview of the various streams of his considerable knowledge is first required.

Moreover, in order to understand his system of thought, some attention must be paid to his motivation in writing what he did. Sincerely-held beliefs may fulfill important psychological needs; feigned ones can of course be held for ulterior motives, such as political convenience. One important component of Postel's thought is the fusion of religious and political concepts. While at times he demonstrated great sincerity, at others his religious views were subordinated to a definite political agenda. Chapter Three addresses this problem. Postel's political beliefs formed an integral part of his cosmology. Moreover, they were described in gender terms. Through examining his political views, one is able to compare his language about women with his actual beliefs about their role in the world. His attempt to reconcile these two spheres of thought in his own mind is a useful point of entry into his concepts of gender.

Postel's travels in the Middle East, combined with time spent in Italy, introduced him to major religious currents from Islam and Judaism. He

became particularly attracted to Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah, which contains a paradigm that explains the structure of the universe and deals with God's interaction with the world. This is the subject of Chapter Four. Kabbalah became Postel's primary source of inspiration. It was while he was studying it that he met Joanna, whom he would consider to be the culmination of ideas which he found in the kabbalistic texts. Moreover, Kabbalah was attractive to other Catholic mystics and reformers, who sought to confirm the position of the Church in a society that was fragmenting. It also served to reinforce notions of human nature, particularly with reference to free will, and was used to combat Protestant theology.

Postel also used Kabbalah to support his very Catholic notions of Mary. He combined Kabbalah with the rich imagery of the Virgin Mary inherited from the late Middle Ages. The fifth chapter looks at Postel, as well as some of his followers, as a Catholic involved in the contemporary controversy over Mary and her place in Christianity.

The sixth chapter is a further examination of the kabbalistic origins of Postel's theory of gender and how his theology of Mother Joanna or the New Eve was derived directly from kabbalistic notions of body and soul. This became one of the major themes in Postel's writing, both in relation to Mother Joanna and in a wider sense. Here as well, Postel's theology regarding the relationship of the body and soul was worked out in a polemic against the

Protestants, in terms of the contemporary debate over the nature of the Eucharist. For Postel, the elements of the Eucharist were also gendered.

The remainder of the thesis is devoted to an examination of the context in which Postel lived and wrote. Chapter Seven examines the writings of some participants in the *querelle des femmes* with whom Postel shared a certain affinity. Postel's emphasis on female virtue places him squarely within the tradition of neoplatonic writers of late fifteenth-century Italy and sixteenth-century France. Postel's ideas regarding Joanna were certainly heretical, but the intellectual framework in which they were placed was not original and was shared with other writers of the period. This chapter examines the parameters of the controversies within the *querelle* literature, and situates Postel within it.

The concluding chapter will look at the changes in *mentalité* which occurred in the sixteenth century as they related to gender. Some feminist historians argue that what occurred in the Protestant Reformation was the masculinization of Christianity.⁹⁶ The examination of gender in the Reformation is a topic of research that has, in the last few years, broadened our historical understanding of the doctrinal disputes. The issue which underlay many doctrinal disputes related to the nature of God and the relationship He had to humanity. The tension between transcendence and

⁹⁶Donna Spivey Ellington, "Impassioned Mother or Passive Icon: The Virgin's Role in Late Medieval and Early Modern Passion Sermons," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48, no.2 (1995), 229.

immanence has a gender component.⁹⁷ Both Luther and Calvin struggled with the awareness of their sinfulness before an omnipotent, transcendent Father. At the same time, Mary's role as caring mediator was rejected by Protestants. Late-medieval Christianity was stripped of its emphasis on ritual and image, but in the process of returning Christianity to its biblical roots and making it rational, many female elements were lost.

Women represented an older, oral tradition. Men's search for transcendence was worked out as a reaction against women; such a movement is seen in as diverse phenomena as the witch craze, the professionalization of medicine, the *querelle des femmes* and the Reformation. The question of the nature of Woman was an important one for this period because it lay at the heart of the moral struggles that society was grappling with in this period of rapid change and instability. Postel's writings provide a unique perspective on the topic and help to illustrate the intimate connection between the debate over women and marriage and the wider religious controversy which characterized the sixteenth century.

⁹⁷Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to make this connection. See *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 82.

Chapter Two
BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

The French medievalist Jacques LeGoff recently stated that any history book that does not include a map is not worth producing.¹ If a map were to be included here, it could trace Postel's wanderings over most of Europe and the Middle East. Postel's life can be seen as almost the stereotype of the impoverished, wandering scholar. What is significant is not that he travelled through parts of the world inaccessible to most Western Europeans, but that his journeys determined the course of his intellectual development. His life of wandering can be considered a metaphor for his acquisition of a wide-ranging and diverse body of knowledge, accumulated through many sources and varied contacts.

As he travelled throughout France, Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, Postel began seeking truth in areas where few of his contemporaries were looking, namely, in the writings of the Jews and Muslims. His approach to doctrinal divisions, both within and beyond Christianity, is subtle. For Postel, the lines between orthodoxy and heterodoxy were blurred. His openness to a wide variety of ideas is apparent not only in his investigation of the Koran and

¹Public lecture, September 26, 1996, Bibliothèque Buffon, Paris.

the Jewish writings, but of other apocryphal Christian writings as well.² His encounters with Orthodox Christians also gave him a broader perspective than that confined to the Roman Church. This openness to all types of religious sources was a major feature of his syncretic view of the world. Reconciling new ideas with existing ones became a natural process for Postel. Every new piece of information that he acquired in his studies and travels was integrated into his thought.

The basis of this open-mindedness was the conviction that God had communicated His truth to humanity. Because Postel believed that everything was part of one coherent, rational system, he felt that evidence for its validity could be found anywhere. His syncretism and his spiritualism were both founded on his rationalism, that is, his belief that one truth - God's revelation - underlay all else and could be discerned through human reason.³ Postel defined Reason as God's rule which was written on the human heart and could not be erased.⁴ His approach was essentially mathematical in that he believed

²He argued for the adoption of apocryphal writings by the Western Church, such as the *Protevangelion of James*, a text which he brought with him from the East and translated into Latin. *Protevangelion sive de natalibus Jesu Christi, et ipsius matris Virginis Mariae, sermo historicus divi Jacobi minoris, consobrini et fratris Domini Jesu, apostoli primarii, et episcopi Christianorum primi Hierosolymis* (Basle: Oporin, 1552).

³For an interesting angle on this question, see Paul Grimley Kuntz, "Process Philosophy: Postel, Sarpi and Whitehead," in *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, 341-55.

⁴*La loy salique*, Chapter XVI. Postel generally capitalized the word *Raison*.

all truth could be deduced from first principles which were universally valid.⁵ His faith in the ability of reason to grasp God's revelation pervaded his writing. This assumption formed the basis of his desire to develop a complete, unified system in which religion, politics and cosmology would all be comprehensible.

In his intellectual biography, William Bouwsma has acknowledged that Postel's thought is a curious combination of many different traditions, brought together into one system.⁶ However, he points out that Postel demonstrates a certain disregard for subtle theoretical distinctions in his subject matter. This quality of Postel's mind affected his writing style. His thoughts seem incoherent at times, since he often places certain ideas together that are not normally connected. His writing is also repetitive because once he had a basic schema, he simply added to it throughout his lifetime. A study of his personal library shows that Postel reread the same works throughout his life and added layers of his own glosses to them; this indicates a certain homogeneity in his thought over many years.⁷

⁵Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques," 191.

⁶Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 141.

⁷The municipal library in Rouen possesses six books of Postel's that later belonged to the biblical scholar Richard Simon. See Valérie Neveu, "De Guillaume Postel à Richard Simon: *Zohar* et autres sources hébraïques de Guillaum Postel dans les collections de la Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen," *Revue des études juives*, 155 (1996), 103.

In his desire for a unified system, Postel was not atypical for the early sixteenth century. Claude-Gilbert Dubois argues that the early sixteenth century, which witnessed the breakdown of both religious and political institutions, looked wistfully to a past in which such divisions were absent.⁸ For example, the search for a utopia where discord did not exist was an important component of the interest in the ancient Celts which arose in sixteenth-century France. Postel was part of this search for roots, for unity and even, as Dubois suggests, for a Father.⁹ Bouwsma also identifies an underlying anxiety about the chaos of life which is present in the early sixteenth century and is manifested in Postel's desire for order.¹⁰

Where Postel differed from others of his time was in the extent to which he personalized his intellectual constructs; his identity was defined by his religious and philosophical system. His self-concept can be understood through his belief that he had been given a message by God to communicate to the world. There is a consistency between the message he preached and the life he lived. In general, he acted on his principles and behaved in such a way as to achieve his stated goals. This consistency in Postel's writings and activities is not unexpected in one whose identity was defined by a sense of mission.

⁸Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois*, 19-20.

⁹Ibid., 57.

¹⁰Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 3.

This is essentially the portrait that Marion Kuntz draws of Postel in her monograph.

It should be acknowledged that in one of his retractions, Postel denied that he was a prophet.¹¹ In spite of this disclaimer, Postel fits many of the criteria formulated by Max Weber in his definition of a prophet.¹² Weber states that a prophet is characterized by an emotionally-driven message which he believes to have been communicated directly from God. The foundation of this conviction is a sense that the world contains meaning. There is "a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated meaningful attitude toward life."¹³ Moreover, the prophecy has a value independent of its messenger; the prophetic message is propagated for its own sake, not for personal gain.¹⁴ As will become evident, Postel's life was guided by this sense that he had a message to proclaim, regardless of the personal consequences.

While the events of Postel's life form in themselves a dramatic narrative, this chapter will examine the relationship between his thought and his activities. A useful overall chronology of Postel's life can be found in William

¹¹"Livre des retractions," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.19.

¹²Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol. I, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 439-68.

¹³*Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 441.

Bouwsma's introductory chapter.¹⁵ The purpose here is twofold: to provide an overview of some of the major themes in his writing and to examine Postel's own self-perceptions. Where Postel has provided his own account of various events, they have been incorporated into the narrative.

The sources for Postel's life are found in what he himself revealed, often in unpublished manuscripts, and from a few contemporaries. The earliest biographical information is found in two accounts: one in the *Vrais portraits* of André Thevet, an orientalist and geographer whom Postel had met in the East, and another in the *Eloges des hommes savans* of Jacques-Auguste De Thou, who was acquainted with Postel in Paris.¹⁶ Later accounts, of which many were written into the seventeenth century, are generally derivative of these two and introduce errors of various sorts.

There was always a certain legendary component to Postel's biography as it was described by his contemporaries. Stories formed around him, cultivated by those who knew him and in some cases encouraged by Postel himself. For example, a rumour began that he had found the elixir of life on one of his voyages to the East when a physician reported that Postel's hair had

¹⁵Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 1-29.

¹⁶Thevet, *Les vrais portraits*, fols.588-90v. Thevet's favourable opinion of Postel is revealed in the fact that in his entry on Postel he glosses over his heresies and praises his knowledge; De Thou, on the other hand, is more critical. See Teissier, *Les eloges ... de M. De Thou*, Vol. II, 47.

turned from grey to black.¹⁷ Similarly, his ability to learn foreign languages was described as supernatural.¹⁸ One of the most unusual stories is recounted by Anthelme Tricaud:

They say that his birth was announced by unusual signs, and that an old woman who attended his baptism foretold some of the troubling events which he would cause in France and Italy by the uniqueness of his doctrine.¹⁹

At his death, many believed he had lived to be over one hundred years old, and this error was reproduced in historical works throughout the early modern period.²⁰ It was Albert Sallengre who examined the evidence of the claim systematically and determined his actual birth date.²¹ Thus, it is only in the eighteenth century that one begins to find critical biographies, such as

¹⁷Hierosme de Monteux, *Commentaire sur la conservation de santé et prolongation de vie*, trans. Claude Valgelas (Lyons: Ian de Tournes, 1559), 231. "Maistre Guillaume Postel homme bien versé aux bonnes lettres, m'a affirmé sur sa foy, que navigeant en Grece, Asie, et aux Indes orientales, il devint tout chenu à cause de lair marin. Mais apres qu'il fust esté quelque temps en terre ferme, tout ce poil gris lui tomba, et en lieu de celui, lui revint le noir." Scevole de Ste. Marthe and Antoine Teissier speculated that Postel had dyed his hair.

¹⁸Thevet, *Les vraies pourtraits*, fol.588v.

¹⁹Anthelme Tricaud, *Essays de litterature pour la connoissance des livres* (Paris: Jean Moreau, 1702), 9. "On dit que sa naissance fut annoncée par des signes surprénans, et qu'une vieille femme qui assistoit à la ceremonie de son Baptême, prédit une partie des événemens troubles qu'il causa en France et en Italie, par la singularité de sa doctrine."

²⁰He was believed to have lived over 100 years by Antoine Teissier, *Les eloges des hommes scavans*, vol. II, 50; La Croix du Maine, *La bibliothèque du sieur de la Croix-du-Maine*, 483; Du Verdier, *Prosopographie*, 2531. However, Adrien Baillet doubted this claim. See his *Des enfans devenus celebres*, 442.

²¹Sallengre, *Memoires de littérature*, Vol. I, 21-3.

those of Sallengre, Nicéron and Chauffepié, which begin to sort out the facts from the legends that abound in earlier accounts of Postel's life.²²

Guillaume Postel was born in 1510 to a peasant family in Normandy. With regard to his childhood, few details are known.²³ He was orphaned at the age of eight, and began teaching school in his parish while still a child himself. At the age of thirteen he left the countryside for Paris, in the hope of getting an education. He immediately experienced the first of several misfortunes. He became acquainted with a group of young thugs, whom he implicitly trusted until they robbed him in his sleep of everything he owned, including his clothes. Shortly after, he fell ill with dysentery and was hospitalized for eighteen months. This incident reveals a certain naïveté, which was more than that of the country boy in the big city, but was a generally innocent attitude that Postel would carry into his adult life as well. After he was well again, he worked for a year gleaning in the fields south of Paris and then returned to the city where he arrived at the Collège de Sainte Barbe. He worked as a servant for one of the teachers, Juan de Gelida, in order to pay for his schooling. This is the basic historical narrative of Postel's childhood as he revealed it to his contemporaries.

²²Sallengre, *Memoires de litterature*, Vol. I, 1-37; Jean-Pierre Nicéron, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des hommes illustres dans la république des lettres* (Paris: Briasson, 1729), Vol. VIII, 295-356; Chauffepié, *Nouveau dictionnaire historique*, Vol.III, 215-36.

²³The information provided here is based on Thevet's account, *Les vraies pourtraits*, fols.588-590v.

What this narrative recounts is in part the image of Postel that he himself constructed. First of all, he perpetuated an image of himself as suffering and impoverished. In fact, the phrase, "mépris, douleur et pauvreté" would become a litany in his writings.²⁴ For Postel, the fact that he was poor was essential to his credibility.²⁵ It served his image of himself as a prophet, since he felt that this was a quality which he shared with Jesus. Postel felt that his lowly birth made him more blessed by God. Poverty was also the measure by which he assessed the spirituality of others and it became one of his criticisms of the institutional Church. Second, he himself promoted the legends that others believed, such as that his hair had changed colour and that he learned languages with supernatural assistance. He claimed to have learned Arabic with the help of a "daemon."²⁶ Both of these traits have a realistic basis - Postel was poor most of his life and he did display an uncanny knack for language acquisition. What their promotion reveals about Postel himself is that he wanted to be seen as someone with spiritual connections.

The reality was not so very different. While working as a servant Postel began studying languages in the evening. He would have had exposure to both Spanish and Portuguese, since the College housed both Spanish and

²⁴For example, see *Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 85; *La doctrine du siècle doré*, 1 [bound with *Les très merveilleuses victoires*].

²⁵Secret, "Introduction," *Le trésor des prophéties de l'univers*, 8-13.

²⁶Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 39.

Portuguese students and was partially funded by the Portuguese crown.²⁷ However, he developed an early interest in semitic languages. Postel taught himself Hebrew after being given an alphabet by some "Jews in the neighbourhood" since Hebrew was not yet part of the curriculum at Ste. Barbe.²⁸ While there is no direct evidence for it, it is not unreasonable to assume that some of the Iberian students were Marranos, that is, converted Jews. His interest in oriental languages dates from this formative period.

Other influences from his school formed the foundation of his later thought. He was introduced to Aristotelianism through Juan de Gelida.²⁹ Postel would build his entire cosmology on Aristotelian principles. He was also exposed to the humanism of Lefèvre d'Étaples and Erasmus, although the Collège de Ste. Barbe still favoured scholastic over humanistic thought when Postel was a student there.³⁰ It is likely that he met Ignatius Loyola, who arrived at Ste. Barbe himself as a young man in 1529.³¹ He later joined the Jesuits in Rome.

²⁷J. Quicherat, *Histoire de Sainte-Barbe: collège, communauté, institution* (Paris: Hachette, 1860), Vol. I, 222.

²⁸Thevet, *Vrais portraits*, fol.588v. Because there were technically no Jews in Paris at this time, this information remains a bit of a mystery. See Josée Balagna-Cousteau, *Arabe et humanisme dans la France des derniers Valois* (Paris: Editions Maisonneuve et Larose, 1989), 49.

²⁹Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 10.

³⁰J. Quicherat, *Histoire de Sainte-Barbe*, Vol.I, 114.

³¹Marion Kuntz considers Postel's early acquaintance with Loyola to have been seminal to his spiritual development. *Guillaume Postel*, 18.

Postel graduated as Master of Arts in 1530. He received a job offer from a Portuguese nobleman to teach in Lisbon, which he declined because he wanted to continue his studies.³² It would become typical of Postel to pursue values other than those of financial and personal security. He seems to have been unconcerned about following a conventional path. For most of the rest of his life he would be more or less transient.

By 1535, Postel's reputation as a linguist led to his employment by Francis I as assistant to the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. Postel accompanied Jean de la Forest, who was going to the East to negotiate an alliance for the King with Suleiman against Charles V.³³ This trip sharpened both Postel's missionary and linguistic appetites. He learned Arabic, Coptic, and Samaritan and met Turkish Christians who claimed that they needed help in obtaining the Scriptures in their own language. He began to formulate the idea that would become the principal theme of his writings from then on; that God wanted the world - or universe, to use Postel's terminology, - united spiritually under the Catholic Church and politically under the authority of the King of France.

³²Thevet, *Les vraies pourtraits*, fol.589.

³³Balagna-Cousteau, *Arabe et humanisme*, 60.

In 1538, Postel's first two books were published, both works of comparative linguistics.³⁴ These works reveal the extent of his early knowledge and interest in foreign languages, even prior to his travels to the East. Postel claimed that he had written the first draft of *De originibus seu de Hebraicae linguae et gentis antiquitate Liber* six years earlier, when he would have been only twenty-two years old, and to have revised it after his first trip to the Ottoman Empire.³⁵ These works are of interest to historians of print for being among the first books published in France to include Arabic characters and to discuss the origin and diffusion of languages.³⁶ What these works reveal is that from an early date, Postel's interest in linguistics had a religious component; the examples he drew on to illustrate linguistic points were generally religious ones. The subordination of his linguistic interests to a larger purpose is confirmed in a later work, in which he revealed that his interest in oriental languages was motivated by the belief that if all people could read the Scriptures in their own language, a large step would be taken towards world concord.³⁷

³⁴*Linguarum duodecim characteribus differentium alphabetum* (Paris: D. Lescuyer, 1538); *De originibus seu de Hebraicae linguae et gentis antiquitate Liber* (Paris: D. Lescuyer, 1538).

³⁵*De originibus*, fol.E2.

³⁶Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel*, Bk. 2, 7; Jean Céard, "Le 'De Originibus' de Postel et la linguistique de son temps," in *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, 19.

³⁷*Les raisons de la monarchie* (Paris: n.p., 1551), v.

What is also apparent in these early works is an interest in origins, derivations and relationships. Postel's linguistic analyses underlay many of his other projects, particularly his political theory. Already in *De originibus*, Postel analyzed the migrations of the descendants of Noah throughout the world through an examination of language families. He argued that the French people, who were the direct descendants of one of the sons of Noah, Japheth, had been divinely ordained to rule the world. This would become the basis of Postel's argument for the political supremacy of France. The issue of descent and primogeniture formed a cornerstone of Postel's thought. The first of anything was considered to be a prototype which contained all the characteristics of everything that would descend from it; this was the case for languages, nations or individuals.³⁸ His reasoning was that the first was created rather than being born, which meant that it was therefore both miraculous and perfect. This emphasis on primogeniture arose from Postel's desire to find order, which for him meant hierarchical order, in the universe.³⁹

The search for the source of things, which in some ways characterized the Renaissance project, is exemplified in the thought of Postel. His earliest

³⁸See Postel's preface to his unpublished translation of the *Zohar*, published in Secret, *Le Zôhar chez les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Librairie Durlacher, 1958), 105.

³⁹"Demonstration tresclaire que Dieu ha plus de providence, cure et sollicitude de la France," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.127v.

works emphasize the antiquity and divine origins of the Hebrew language.⁴⁰ Postel believed that the first language had been given to man as a gift from God; it had not evolved naturally as some were already postulating.⁴¹ His entire linguistic theory was based on examining relationships between other languages as derivative of Hebrew.⁴²

His interest in and knowledge of Hebrew was furthered when, in Venice in 1537, he met the printer Daniel Bomberg, who acquired rare Hebrew manuscripts for him.⁴³ Postel became acquainted with others in Bomberg's circle, such as Elias Levita and Teseo Ambrogio, both Hebrew scholars.⁴⁴ His expertise was quickly recognized. In 1538, back in Paris, Postel was hired as one of the first lecturers in oriental languages (Greek, Hebrew and Arabic) and mathematics in what would later become the Collège de France, newly established by Francis I as an institution of learning independent of the

⁴⁰*Linguarum duodecim*, introduction; *De originibus*, fol.C1. See also Marie-Luce Launay, "Le *De originibus* de 1538: une rhétorique des origines," in *Guillaume Postel 1581-1981. Actes du colloque*, 307.

⁴¹Céard, "Le 'De originibus,'" 23 and Keith Percival, "The Reception of Hebrew in Sixteenth Century Europe: The Impact of the Cabala," *Historiographia Linguistica*, 11 (1984), 21-38.

⁴²"La naturelle raison du tresparfait sense de quelconque Authorite," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.14v.

⁴³Georges Weill, *Vie et caractère de Guillaume Postel*, trans. François Secret (Milan: Archè, 1987), 77.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 38.

Sorbonne. At this time in his life, Postel's future seemed propitious; he was in the King's favour as well as that of his sister, Marguerite.⁴⁵

This worldly success did not last long, however. Postel had the misfortune to become connected to Guillaume Poyet, Chancellor under Francis I. Postel provided an account of his relationship to Poyet in his "Apologie" at the end of *Raisons de la monarchie*, published in 1551.⁴⁶ He stated that he allowed Poyet to arrange a benefice for him, since he was not paid on a regular basis as the King's lecturer in the College.⁴⁷ Postel thus felt some loyalty to his patron and dedicated his 1541 work, *De republica seu magistratibus Atheniensium*, to Poyet.

However, in 1541 Poyet fell out of favour with Marguerite, the King's sister, and, due to the vagaries of court politics, was imprisoned in the Bastille in 1542 and tried in 1544.⁴⁸ Because Postel had allied himself with Poyet, he too was in disgrace and lost his position. Postel weakened his prospects further by trying to defend Poyet to the King. He travelled to the Pyrenees, where the King and his sister were staying at Montmarsan, to appeal to

⁴⁵Thevet, *Les vraies portraits*, fol.589v.

⁴⁶*Raisons de la monarchie*, xlii-xliv. See also Thevet, *Les vraies portraits*, fol.590.

⁴⁷Secret, ed., *Le trésor des prophéties*, 9.

⁴⁸R.J. Knecht, *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 484-5.

Francis on Poyet's behalf.⁴⁹ His naïveté is apparent in the fact that on the same trip he decided to ask for financial help from the King for a trip to the Orient to collect ancient books.⁵⁰ This appeal to Francis and Marguerite only exacerbated his own disfavour with them.

It was this failure to secure a position within the royal circle that seems to have stimulated Postel's spiritual fervour. After his rejection in the French court, he abandoned ideas of worldly success and sought spiritual fulfillment instead. He dedicated the next few years exclusively to religious concerns and began a prolific writing career. In 1543 alone he published six books, one of which was *De orbis terra concordia*, his largest work.⁵¹ In it, he outlined his message for the creation of one true religion based on Reason.⁵² He felt that religious division occurred because God's revelation was imperfectly understood. Postel believed that Christianity, Judaism and Islam each had some perspective on the truth and that a religion based on Reason could be developed which incorporated aspects of each. He argued that Jews and

⁴⁹Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 41.

⁵⁰*Raisons de la monarchie*, xlvi; Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel*, Bk. II, 32.

⁵¹Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel*, Bk. II, 88.

⁵²*De orbis terrae concordia libri quatuor*, (Basle: Oporin, 1544).

Muslims both recognized the same God as supreme, although they each had some misconceptions with regard to His nature.⁵³

Although this may sound extraordinarily broad-minded, it must be added that for Postel, the culmination of revelation was found in the person of Jesus and his synthesis really amounted to a recognition of Christ by the other world religions. He believed that Jews, Muslims and Christians were all seeking the same person, Jesus, and that through him, all people would be reconciled.⁵⁴ He felt that if Christianity was correctly understood, it would be accepted by all people. He defined his role thus: "My particular task is to take care of my brothers throughout the world, ... who only through the lack of reason have been kept in the darkness of the Koran ..." ⁵⁵ It was the duty of Christians to live righteous lives and by so doing, reveal the truth of Christianity; he criticized the clergy for not having lived morally upright lives and thus having failed to demonstrate the true faith to the Muslims.⁵⁶

With regard to the Jews, Postel argued that the message of Christ was implicit in the law of Moses, if the Torah was read kabbalistically. He added

⁵³*De rationibus Spiritus sancti* (1543) fols.7v and 38v, published by François Secret in "Guillaume Postel en la place de Realte," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 192 (1977), 61.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁵"Livre des retractions," B.N.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.8bis: "Mon particulier devoir, qui est d'havoir soing de mon frere espars en tout le monde ... qui - seulement par faulte de raison sont tenus - soubz les tenebres de l'Alchoran ..."

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, fol.8v.

that the Jews would have been able to recognize Jesus as the Messiah when he appeared, if they had really understood Moses.⁵⁷ He disliked the Talmud and wrote to Theodore Zwinger, trying to discourage a re-edition of it.⁵⁸ He asked Conrad Pellican to furnish him with examples from the Talmud where Christianity was blasphemed and compared the Talmud unfavourably with the Jewish mystical texts.⁵⁹ In his strongest language, he described the Jews as the murderous mother who had killed her child, Jesus.⁶⁰ He argued that if the Jews were to be converted to Christianity at the end of the age, it would have to be in accordance with the Catholic Church, as other nations had been converted.⁶¹ Postel considered himself the one who would reveal the truth about God's revelation. He began calling himself Elias Pandochaeus, the new

⁵⁷In the context of this discussion, he developed quite a radical interpretation of early Christianity, arguing that Jesus had been opposed by the establishment ("les grands") because they realized that the message of Jesus threatened their position. Secret, ed., *Candélabre de Moïse*, 382.

⁵⁸Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 26 (1964), 136. The first complete edition of the Talmud had been published in 1520-23. The status of the Talmud was a subject of some controversy in the mid-sixteenth century; it was burned by papal decree in 1553 and placed on the first *Index* in 1559. Paul F. Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540-1605* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 140-5.

⁵⁹"Anekdotia de Guilelmo Postello," [letter from Postel to Pellican, dated July 5, 1553] published in *Museum Helveticum*, 658.

⁶⁰Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 23 (1961), 541.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 543.

Elijah.⁶² Therefore, while he spoke of the unity of all religions, Postel's attitude toward Judaism and Islam was not as radical as some historians have assumed.⁶³

Postel's theology was essentially a tool for Catholic reform, a project which he openly admitted.⁶⁴ In a mission statement, directed toward the Pope, he outlined views which were in agreement with those of Luther, for example that the Pope should share the merits of Christ with everyone and forgive people's sins. However, Postel added that then all Christians would be united under the Pope and would co-operate with him. This would culminate in the communal partaking of the Eucharist. In this way, he felt that Christianity could be preached as the religion of reason so that Jews and Muslims would be converted and all humans would be saved.⁶⁵

He also considered Christianity the culmination of God's revelation historically. His understanding of the history of religion, as his understanding of linguistics, was based on the model of inheritance and primogeniture. Postel argued that the Jews had been supplanted by the Gauls, through their descent

⁶²This name is used at the end of *Panthenosia*, in the *Candelabre de Moyse*, in "De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.22v, and elsewhere.

⁶³Josée Balagna-Cousteau presented a rather optimistic picture of Postel's views toward Islam. See *Arabe et humanisme*, 121.

⁶⁴Postel outlines his mission in "Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.151.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

from Noah, as the true inheritors of God's divine blessing.⁶⁶ In his mind, it was obvious that Christianity had replaced Judaism; if this was not so, Jesus' appearance on earth would not have been necessary.⁶⁷ With regard to Islam, he repeatedly called the Muslims the "bastard" children of Israel, since they descended from Abraham through Ishmael rather than Isaac. In fact, he even suggested that their creation through Hagar had not been intended by God, but occurred because Abraham made the mistake of taking advice from Sarah.⁶⁸ Since the Muslims were not the legitimate heirs of the Jewish tradition, they could be discounted.

Even so, the idea that the three world religions could be reconciled, or that Judaism and Islam contained some truth, was considered scandalous in the sixteenth century.⁶⁹ Postel's knowledge of Jewish and Muslim sources was enough to make him a suspicious figure.⁷⁰ Postel had submitted *De orbis terrae concordia* to the Faculty of Theology in Paris, hoping the book would receive approval as a manual for missionaries to the East. Instead, it dismissed the work as irrelevant for this purpose and placed it on the

⁶⁶"L'abreuvé parole de l'ordre et droict absolu ou est contenu en brief le Droict Divin Naturel et Civil de l'aisneesse du monde, qui est le fruit du regne," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.7.

⁶⁷Backus, ed., *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese*, 25.

⁶⁸*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 9.

⁶⁹Secret, "Guillaume Postel en la place de Realte," 58.

⁷⁰See, for example, the anonymous tract, *Ad principes christianos cohortatio pacificatoria*, 18.

Sorbonne's Index.⁷¹ Postel then left Paris for Basle, claiming that he was exiled after trying to get the work accepted by the Faculty of Theology.⁷² Postel was therefore facing considerable opposition even before he began proclaiming his view of a female messiah.

Basle was a centre for religious refugees in the 1540s. The city cultivated a spirit of *laissez-faire* with regard to religious issues.⁷³ In Basle, Oporin published *De orbis terra concordia*, but after publication it was also banned in Rome and Venice.⁷⁴ Postel's notion that all religions could contain some element of the truth also governed his alliances with various Protestants, with whom he became acquainted in Basle.⁷⁵ He was on friendly terms with Oporin, Plantin, Zwinger, Bibliander, Ortelius, Melanchthon, and Schwenkfeld.⁷⁶ Theodore Bibliander, the successor to Zwingli in Zurich, spoke

⁷¹Weill, *Vie et caractère*, 47.

⁷²Ibid., 50.

⁷³Peter Bietenholz, "Edition et réforme à Bâle," in *La réforme et le livre: L'Europe de l'imprimé (1517-v.1570)*, ed. Jean-François Gilmont (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1990), 246.

⁷⁴Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 10. *Index des livres interdits*, Vol. I: *Index de l'université de Paris*, eds. J.M. de Bujanda et al. (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1985), 172.

⁷⁵Roland Bainton, "Wylliam Postell and the Netherlands," *Nederlandsh archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 24 (1931), 161-72.

⁷⁶Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 47.

fondly of Postel and cited him as an expert in oriental languages.⁷⁷ The basis of their friendship was an interest in the Hebrew language and writings, as well as in the publication of the Scriptures in the vernacular.⁷⁸ Postel's belief in personal revelation would also bring him into contact with radical Protestants such as David Joris and Caspar Schwenckfeld; he communicated with the latter on several occasions and commended him for his understanding of the two natures of Christ.⁷⁹

However, while he had certain sympathies with some Protestants and in some ways was as critical of the Pope and the institutional church as they, he had major disagreements with the Calvinists. He and Calvin disagreed and disliked each other. In 1543, Postel published *Alcorani seu legis Mahometi et Evangelistarum Concordia Liber*, which condemned Protestantism because it denied that man had free will.⁸⁰ It was this work which Calvin particularly objected to. Postel's dislike of the symbolic view of the sacraments held by the Protestants would also become a point of disagreement between them. Ten

⁷⁷Bibliander, *De ratione communi omnium linguarum et literaturum commentarius*, 4-5, 8, 11, 14, 26.

⁷⁸Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 241.

⁷⁹His letters to Schwenckfeld are reproduced in Jan Kvacala, *Postelliana*, (Jurjew: C. Mattieson, 1915), 8-13. See also *La vierge vénitienne*, 31.

⁸⁰*Alcorani seu legis Mahometi et evangelistarum concordia liber*, (Paris: P. Gromors, 1543), 37.

years later, Postel would endure Calvin's wrath for writing a defence of the Unitarian, Michael Servetus, whom Calvin had had killed.⁸¹

In spite of some similarities with some Protestants, Postel's theology would remain predominantly Catholic. In 1544, he decided that his mission would best be served by an alliance with the newly-founded Society of Jesus. He went to Rome to join the Jesuits and was ordained a priest. However, he only remained with them for a year and a half before he was expelled from the order by Loyola. Postel explained that he was expelled because the Jesuits disliked his strongly Gallican convictions. Postel's beliefs that the King of France should have authority over the French Church and that the Pope did not have authority over a Council quite obviously clashed with Jesuit allegiance to the Pope.⁸² There was probably more at issue between Postel and the Jesuits, however. François Secret argues that by this time Postel had already developed his sense of personal mission, that he was calling himself the "pape angelique," and that this may also have disinclined the Jesuits to regard him favourably.⁸³

⁸¹His *Apologia pro Serveto* was not published in his lifetime, but exists in manuscript form in the British Library, in Sloane ms.1411. It has been published by Kvacala in *Postelliana*, 16-32.

⁸²"La nouvelle Eve, mère du monde" in Secret, ed., *Apologies et rétractions*, 38. See also *Des merveilles du monde et principalement des admirables choses des Indes* (Paris: Jean Ruelle, 1553), fol.84v.

⁸³François Secret, "Guillaume Postel et les courants prophétiques de la Renaissance," *Studi francesi*, 1 (1957), 377.

However, even after his expulsion from the order, he and Loyola apparently felt no ill will for the other.⁸⁴ In 1544, Postel wrote a letter to Nicolas Psaulme, Bishop and Count of Verdun, appealing to him to welcome the members of the Company who had been studying in Paris but were expelled by Francis while he was at war with Charles V.⁸⁵ The activities of the Jesuits were described with admiration in Postel's *Des merveilles du monde*, published in 1553.⁸⁶ Postel remained loyal to the Jesuits for the rest of his life; he continued to wear their habit and to identify himself as a Jesuit priest.⁸⁷ Several Jesuits were even among those who believed Postel's claim concerning Joanna.⁸⁸

After his expulsion from the Jesuits, Postel spent the next few years in Italy. During this time, he developed his theology to its fullest extent. In Rome, he began studying Kabbalah with von Widmanstetter, who had access to the extensive library of Hebrew texts belonging to Cardinal Egidio da

⁸⁴John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 57.

⁸⁵"Lettre de Postel à N. Psaulme," published in Weill, *Vie et caractère*, 227-8.

⁸⁶*Des merveilles du monde*, fol.79 ff.

⁸⁷"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel touchant les propos de la mere Joanne," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.103v. Postel's short stay with the Jesuits was used later in the century as an example of the sort of insane people that belonged to the order. Estienne Pasquier, in his prosecution of Jesuits in France, used the fact that Postel had belonged to the order to strengthen his case. Estienne Pasquier, *Les recherches de la France*, 337.

⁸⁸Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 18.

Viterbo. In Venice, Postel also had access to Daniel Bomberg's library which contained many Hebrew sources, including the *Zohar* and the *Bahir*, two of the most important mystical texts.⁸⁹ After 1544 Postel became increasingly immersed in the kabbalistic writings and incorporated their ideas into his already existing theology.

In 1547, he left Rome for Venice and had what would be the most significant personal encounter of his life. While working as a chaplain in the hospital of Saints John and Paul he met Joanna. Those qualities which first attracted him were her selfless dedication to the hospital, her celibacy and her asceticism.⁹⁰ However, it was not only Joanna's way of life which he admired. What impressed Postel about Joanna was her understanding of spiritual matters in general and especially of Kabbalah:

this poor simple virgin knew neither how to read nor write, had almost never taken the time to hear a sermon, knew nothing of Latin, Hebrew, Greek, Chaldean or anything of the ancient writings; nevertheless, she did not need four, five or ten days ahead of time in order to explain divine mysteries to me. When I had some difficulties which were otherwise impossible to understand, she explained and translated them as clearly as I would have done the Lord's Prayer.⁹¹

⁸⁹Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 9.

⁹⁰*La vierge vénitienne*, 8-9.

⁹¹"La nouvelle Eve mère du monde," in Secret, ed., *Apologies and Retractions*, 38. "... ceste pauvre simple vierge qui ne scavoit ne lire ne escrire, ne n'avoit quasi jamais pris le temps d'oyr ung sermon, tant s'en fault qu'elle sceut latin, hebrieu, grec, calde ou quelque chose literale des Escriptions vieilles, neantmoins ne failloit jamais quatre ou cinq, ou dix jours devant, proposant les divins misteres de tellement m'informer que quant je venoys auxdictes difficultés du tout aultrement à entendre impossibles, tant

According to Postel, Joanna, who was about twenty years older than he and whom he called his Mother, was the New Eve and he himself was the offspring of a union between her and Jesus (New Adam). Postel thus referred to himself as the New Cain. Together they would repair the damage caused at the time of creation and would usher in a new age. His message was that the inferior part of the human soul (the lower, material, passive part of the soul) had not been saved by Christ and therefore needed to be saved by a female, his Mother Joanna. Specifically, Postel believed that her coming had been foretold in Kabbalah. His translation of the *Zohar*, which Oporin refused to publish with Postel's glosses, was designed to prove that Joanna was the female messiah.⁹² His allegiance to this belief throughout his life is suggested by the fact that in his will he asked that his manuscripts be kept after his death "and principally the *Zohar*" which he asked his executors, Charlemagne Asconia and Nicole Lefevre, to have published.⁹³

Postel left Venice in 1549 and travelled to the Holy Land. It is not certain why he left, but it seems likely that he had already begun to preach his message and promote the religious significance of Joanna in Italy before he

clairement les entendoys et traduisoys comme j'eusse fait le Pater noster." See also "Livre des retractions," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.18.

⁹²This work has remained in manuscript and is housed in the Sloane collection in the British library.

⁹³"Testament de G. Postel," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.118. The importance of the *Zohar* for Postel until the end of his life is also evident through his annotations which suggest multiple readings. See Neveu, "De Guillaume Postel," 84.

left. In *Le prime nove del altro mondo*, he explained that Joanna had promised to send him the "outer clothing of the immortal body" but that:

... the envy of Satan, having prevented us from performing Charity in this place chosen by her and which was occupied by a crowd of new hypocrites, I left there in 1549 for Jerusalem, to look for copies of the New Testament in Arabic ...⁹⁴

The fact that he had begun speaking about Joanna in Italy is confirmed by a letter which Roland Bainton discovered by David Joris from 1549 which referred to Postel and Joanna, so that it seems apparent that he was communicating his belief about her in some circles, long before he began to publish anything which directly mentioned her.⁹⁵ Postel claimed later that he had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to promote his views on the New Eve immediately because the time was not yet right to reveal them.⁹⁶ However, he did try to publish a translation of the *Bahir* which included his commentary suggesting that the Jewish text foretold the coming of the New Eve.⁹⁷

His publications between 1547 and 1553 reveal an increased interest in esoteric thought and specifically Kabbalah. His *Candelabre de Moïse*, published in 1548, was his most complete explanation of kabbalistic thought.

⁹⁴*La vierge vénitienne*, 33. "Mais l'envie de Satan nous ayant empêchés de faire la Charité dans ce lieu choisi par elle et qui fut occupé par une foule de nouveaux hypocrites, je m'en allai de là en 1549, vers Jérusalem, pour chercher les livres du Nouveau-Testament en langue Arabe ..."

⁹⁵Bainton, "Wylliam Postell and the Netherlands," 164.

⁹⁶Secret, "Guillaume Postel en la place de Realte," 62.

⁹⁷François Secret, "Notes sur G. Postel," *BHR*, 35 (1973), 88.

In a discussion of the Shekhinah, which is a female spiritual component of God in Kabbalah, he refers to the "mère du monde" although he does not specifically name Joanna.⁹⁸ However, he explained briefly why a female saviour was necessary.⁹⁹ *Absconditorum clavis*, which is his most gnostic work, dates from the same period, and also foreshadows his prophecy. In it, he argued that God progressively reveals his truth, which can be discerned by those who know where to look for it and that the Church was on the verge of a new age.¹⁰⁰

After two years in the Middle East, Postel returned to France, where he learned of Joanna's recent death. Shortly thereafter, in 1551, he had a mystical experience where he claimed that she possessed his body for a period of several weeks; from this point on he definitely considered himself a prophet of the new age and began actively preaching about his Mother Joanna.¹⁰¹ He also seems to have enlarged his own role in the divine scheme as her spiritual son after this time. As the New Cain, he would repair the damage that had been begun with Old Cain, who had murdered his brother.

His most infamous work, *Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde* was published in France in 1553 and the Italian versions *Il*

⁹⁸Secret, ed., *Candelabre de Moïse*, 369.

⁹⁹Ibid., 370.

¹⁰⁰Guillaume Postel, *Clef des choses cachées dans la constitution du monde*, trans. Grillot de Givry (Paris: Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1899), 73-4.

¹⁰¹This incident is described in detail in *La vierge vénitienne*, 34-6.

libro della divina ordinatione and *Prime nove del altro mondo* followed in 1555. The reception of Postel's prophecy and his own subsequent reaction warrants some examination. In France, *Les très merueilleuses victoires* caused an immediate sensation. In 1555 an anonymous tract appeared in Paris, *Ad principes christianos cohortatio pacificatoria*, which scornfully suggested that Postel had written the work in praise of women in order to gain favour at court.¹⁰² There were also accusations made that he and Joanna were really lovers.¹⁰³

Postel had rather cleverly disguised his messianic message as a book in praise of women. However, because the book was difficult to find, many rumours started based on misunderstandings of Postel's message.¹⁰⁴ His message that Jesus had only saved the masculine part of the soul was widely

¹⁰²*Ad Principes christianos cohortatio pacificatoria*, 17-19. Postel had dedicated the work to Marguerite, sister of Henri II.

¹⁰³Postel's reaction to this is recorded in "Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr. 2115, fol.111.

¹⁰⁴Copies of *Les très merueilleuses victoires* were so rare that by the seventeenth century, bibliophiles were unsure even what the actual title of the book was and in what language it had been written. See Tricaud, *Essays de litterature pour la connoissance des livres*, 149-50; Pierre-Valentin Faydit, *Supplement des essays de litterature* (Paris: Pierre Ribou, 1703), Part I, 3; Sallengre, *Memoires de litterature*, Vol.I, 14; Claude Sallier, "Eclaircissements sur l'histoire de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr.nouv.acq. 22759, fol.134. In 1729 Nicéron stated that Postel's rarest work was *Les très merueilleuses victoires*, which cost at least 40 ecus to buy. Nicéron, *Memoires pour servir a l'histoire des hommes illustres*, 333.

misinterpreted as a claim that Jesus had saved only men and not women.¹⁰⁵ Matthieu d'Antoine charged Postel with saying that Jesus was a hermaphrodite, because he had said that Jesus contained both male and female within him.¹⁰⁶ Of course, even those authors who correctly understood his message were able to denounce it as heretical, as did the *Ad principes christianos*.

The fact that it was not understood reveals that among the wider public, there was little popular awareness of the world view that Postel was using as the foundation for his understanding of Christianity. Neoplatonism was the realm of the theologians and philosophers and did not intersect with the more common-sense view of what others believed at the time. His readers did not understand his concept of the quadripartite nature of man, the division of the soul into superior and inferior parts. Postel despaired that no one was able to comprehend this basic concept:

¹⁰⁵For example, Couillard, *Les contredits du seigneur du Pavillon*, 107. It was the seventeenth century biblical critic Richard Simon who was credited with having the clearest understanding of Postel for his time. See Faydit, *Supplement des essais de littérature*, Part I, 3. Even modern scholars have sometimes misunderstood Postel's theology; the nineteenth-century French historian Abel Lefranc described Postel as believing the female sex needed its own saviour. Abel Lefranc, "La détention de Guillaume Postel au prieuré de Saint-Martin-des-Champs (1562-1581)," Offprint from *L'annuaire-bulletin de la société de l'histoire de France*, 28 (1891), 7.

¹⁰⁶"Apologie de G.P. aux calumnies d'un qui se dict Docteur en loix nomme Matthieu d'Antoine," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fols. 1-29v. See also "Livre des retractions," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.11v.

... the divine nature is not well understood in this miserable century however much evidence exists, but the spirit of error, in order to place and to keep in doubt [the idea of] immortality, attempts to remove understanding from people.¹⁰⁷

In the face of opposition, Postel did not retract his views about Mother Joanna, but rather tried to explain them in more detail, because he realized that people did not understand even his basic premises. He outlined his views that both men and women have the same type of souls and that he was referring to the different components of the soul.¹⁰⁸ He explained that he had never intended to argue that women had not been saved.¹⁰⁹ In his defense against Matthieu d'Antoine, Postel cited Thomas Aquinas on the two natures of man and defended his position as being consistent with scholastic logic.¹¹⁰

Postel's reaction to his detractors took several forms. Given the amount of hatred which Postel generated, it is not surprising that he had enemies and even that he became slightly paranoid. In his assessment of Postel's mental health, Lebigot concludes that while he reveals a certain amount of paranoia, he did have some real enemies, such as Theodore Beza, Lambert Daneau,

¹⁰⁷"Qu'est-ce que de l'image de Dieu à laquelle l'homme est créé, formé et fait," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 307. "... la nature tres divine est peu cogneue en ce miserable siecle, combien qu'il s'en voye des preuves innumerables, mais l'esprit d'erreur pour mettre et maintenir en doubte de l'immortalité, s'efforce de oster la cognoissance au monde."

¹⁰⁸"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.101v.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., fol.101.

¹¹⁰"Apologie de G.P.," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.5v.

Henri Estienne and Flaccius Illyricus.¹¹¹ Whether he was being realistic or not, Postel considered his message to be capable of getting him killed; he concluded that he would end up as a martyr.¹¹² The tendency to think thus had begun even before Postel began preaching his message of the female messiah and his experience after publishing *Les très merveilleuses victoires* confirmed what was already present in his mind. Postel believed that he had been poisoned by "Lutherans" and atheists at the time of his immutation in 1551.¹¹³ However, his sense of persecution and suffering also confirmed his own sense of election as a prophet. Postel vaunted his own virtuous rejection of wealth by claiming that he was ridiculed because he rejected the wealth of the church and that this formed part of his enemies' denunciation of him.¹¹⁴ He saw himself as suffering for the sake of his message: "having spent eight years in continual affliction, always thinking of the said Concord and with no human assistance found anywhere, I try to bear it."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹Lebigot, "La fureur de Guillaume Postel," 107.

¹¹²Couillard, *Les contredicts du seigneur de Pavillon*, fols.108v-109. "... il devoit, ainsi qu'il disoit, publiquement mourir pour le peuple en soustenant ses hereticques et malheureuses propositions: Et luy et son saint Iehan ne s'en debvoyent jamais fuir: mais persister et patiemment porter et endurer les tormens."

¹¹³*La vierge vénitienne*, 36.

¹¹⁴*L'histoire memorable des expéditions*, preface (unnumbered).

¹¹⁵*Raisons de la monarchie*, ix. "... affin que comme depuys huit ans en ca en continuelle afflictions toujours pensant aux moyens de ladicte Concorde ay passé, et plus sans ayde humanine retrouvé que quelconque aultre ayde de tous moyens, Je essaye a tant souffrir ..."

In spite of hostile reaction, Postel continued to publish and preach his message. There were reports that he was preaching in both Italy and France after 1553.¹¹⁶ Jean de Marconville stated that he had seen Postel preaching publicly about Joanna, whom Marconville decided must have been a witch.¹¹⁷ In 1566, Henri Estienne complained that Postel was allowed to teach in Paris; he was outraged that Postel drew an audience of educated listeners:

For isn't it the greatest wonder, without parallel, that a Guillaume Postel preaching in the middle of the University of Paris for about thirteen years of a woman whom he called his Mother Joanne, who would save women as Jesus Christ saved men, actually found several people who began to listen to him...¹¹⁸

Estienne considered Postel's message to be such a combination of philosophy and erudition mixed with chimeras that he could easily convince people of his message. He suggested that since Postel was able to confuse people in as sophisticated a place as Paris, he would have been able to start his own religion among rural people had he gone into the countryside.

¹¹⁶For example, de Bèze, *Histoire ecclesiastique des eglises reformees au royaume de France*, 87.

¹¹⁷Jean de Marconville, *De la bonte et mauvaistie des femmes* (Paris: Jean Dallier, 1564), fols.68r-68v.

¹¹⁸Estienne, *L'introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes*, 122. "Car n'est-ce point plus grand' merveille sans comparaison, qu'un Guillaume Postel preschant au milieu de l'université de Paris, depuis environ treze ans, qu'une femme qu'il appeloit sa mere Jeane, sauveroit les femmes ainsi que Jesus Christ les hommes, trouva plusieurs qui commençoient à luy prester l'oreille...."

There were charges made, by people like Matthieu d'Antoine and by Guillaume Lindan, that Postel had actually started a new religion of "Postellism."¹¹⁹ Postel's reply to this charge was the following:

No, I don't want to introduce a new religion, but I want, through Natural Reason ... to destroy all the false understandings of the Jews, the semi Jews [Muslims], the false Christians and the pagans.¹²⁰

In spite of this disclaimer, Postel managed to draw a small following. After the Council of Trent banned his works, Postel cultivated a group of disciples, particularly of Norman origin, including Guy and Nicolas Le Fèvre de La Boderie, Robert Cerneau, Vincent Cossard and others.¹²¹

Among his friends and associates, however, his prophecy regarding Joanna was either dismissed or at least tactfully ignored. One of his followers, Florimond de Raemond, a staunch defender of Catholicism, directly addressed the issue of Joanna.¹²² De Raemond began his defense by stating that Postel could learn in a day what others took a month to learn. He then tried to dismiss his prophecy regarding Joanna by arguing that Postel had not really

¹¹⁹"Livre des retractions," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.17v.

¹²⁰"Apologie de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.13. "Donc je ne veulx pas introduyre une religion nouvelle non, mais je veulx par la Raison naturelle ... destruire toutes les faulses intelligences des Juifs, des semi Juifs, des faulx Chrestiens et des payens."

¹²¹Jean-François Maillard, "Postel et ses disciples normands," in *Guillaume Postel, 1581-1981. Actes du colloque*, 84.

¹²²De Raemond, *L'histoire de la naissance, progresz et decadence de l'heresie de ce siecle*, 227ff.

meant to say what he did about her. Rather, she had been kind to him during his stay in Venice and what he wrote was simply a sort of tribute to her.

Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, another of his closest followers, borrowed many of Postel's ideas such as his Gallicanism and his cosmology, while leaving his claims regarding Joanna.¹²³ Secret examined a letter written by Le Fèvre to Montano, the head of the polyglot Bible project, in which Le Fèvre discussed Postel.¹²⁴ Le Fèvre stated that Postel has retracted his views to the Doctors of Paris and could not be considered heretical because his life was so pious and his commitment to the Catholic Church so sincere. He defended his own work by stating that the only elements of Postel's thought that he used were those which were reconcilable with Catholic orthodoxy.¹²⁵ Similarly, in his study of Postel's followers, Maillard concludes that despite his illuminism, there were certain limits beyond which Le Fèvre would not pass and that his use of Postel's heterodox ideas was minimal.¹²⁶

There were also others who admired his scholarship in some areas but did not agree with his theories about Joanna. Conrad Pellican wanted to publish Postel's translation of the *Zohar* but never did because the book was

¹²³Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 21, (1959), 456.

¹²⁴Secret, "Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie représentant de G. Postel à la Polyglotte d'Anvers," 245-6. The letter is in *Bibl. Stockholm Cod. Holm. A.902*.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 249.

¹²⁶Maillard, "Postel et ses disciples Normands," in *Guillaume Postel. Actes du colloque*, 88.

interwoven with his personal commentary that showed how the Zohar directly foretold the coming of the Venetian Virgin.¹²⁷ Oporin published Postel's translation of the *Protevangelion*, an apocryphal work of the early church, but deleted Postel's glosses.

In 1553, Postel was forbidden to teach in Paris. He left the city and in 1554 was offered a teaching position at the University of Vienna by the Emperor. Postel accepted, but did not stay long. He left abruptly when he learned that his books had been put on the Index and went to Venice to plead his case before the Venetian Inquisition.¹²⁸ On his way out of Vienna, a curious incident occurred; he was briefly imprisoned in a case of mistaken identity because he had been confused with a Franciscan monk wanted on a murder charge. Eventually, he arrived in Venice and appeared before the Inquisition in what he considered good faith to appeal its decision. Its conclusion was that he was not a heretic, but that he was insane. He was arrested in 1555 for his heretical views and imprisoned in Rome. Upon the death of Paul IV in August, 1559, rioting mobs, angered at the Pope's repressive policies, forced the prisons open.¹²⁹ Postel was among those who were freed.

¹²⁷Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 22 (1960), 389, footnote 3.

¹²⁸He described this event in his "Apologie de G.P," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.10v.

¹²⁹*Dictionnaire historique de la papauté*, ed. Philippe Levillain, (Paris: Fayard, 1994), s.v. "Paul IV," 1269.

After his release from prison, he tried to rehabilitate himself both with the Jesuits and the French crown, but without success in either case. However, he also seems to have continued teaching and preaching in public during this time. In 1562, he was arrested for public agitation and was placed under "house arrest" in the Monastery of St. Martin des Champs in Paris, by order of the Parliament of Paris, and forbidden to write anything unless it was approved by the Bishop of Paris.¹³⁰ He lived at the Monastery until his death in 1581.

It appears that in spite of the court order, he had some freedom of movement. In a letter to Masius, he mentioned preaching in Paris in 1563.¹³¹ According to Jean-Baptiste de la Fosse, Postel was forbidden to preach in Paris again in January, 1564.¹³² He may have been a witness to the miracle of Laon in 1566, an alleged miracle involving the healing of a young woman of demonic possession, which was said to have been witnessed by 84,000 people and about which Postel and others wrote. Historians disagree as to whether Postel was an eye-witness, but it is not impossible.¹³³ There is also a rather curious entry

¹³⁰Lefranc, "La Détention de Guillaume Postel," 18.

¹³¹Letter to Masius, in Chauffepié, *Dictionnaire historique*, Vol. III, 225.

¹³²De la Fosse, *Journal d'un curé ligueur de Paris sous les trois derniers Valois*, 67. (The journal runs from 1557 to 1590.)

¹³³Marion Kuntz considered Postel to be an eyewitness, based on his reports, but Irena Backus has recently argued that Postel described it from second-hand information. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 143; Irena Backus, ed., *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese*, xxii. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in chapter six.

in the journal of Jean-Baptiste de la Fosse for January, 1573 which refers to Postel preaching to the people of Paris; De la Fosse reported that he said that they would perish within eight days if they did not heed his message, which was that God would arrive in the stomach of a woman.¹³⁴ This may have been a garbled corruption of his prophecy regarding Joanna.

Overall, however, Postel's later years in St. Martin des Champs seem to have been tranquil, although they were not lived in complete isolation. He had a number of visitors, as Theodore Beza noted, "having been often visited by people who were curious, and hardly wiser than he."¹³⁵ As well, he continued to publish in his later years, mostly works of geography or mathematics and these works are orthodox, suggesting that they had received the required approval.¹³⁶

One question requiring consideration is whether Postel's belief in Joanna continued to the end of his life. At one point, Postel admitted to having been

¹³⁴De la Fosse, *Journal d'un curé ligueur de Paris*, 158. There does not seem to be any other reference to this event.

¹³⁵de Bèze, *Histoire ecclesiastique des eglises reformees au royaume de France*, 88. "... estant souvent visité par gens curieux, et non gueres plus sages que luy."

¹³⁶His work from this period includes geography - *La vraye et entière description du royaume de France* (Paris: n.p., 1570); poetry - *De caesis haeresiarchis elegia* (Lyons: Nicolai Montani, 1572); anthropology - *Des histoires orientales et principalement des Turkes* (Paris: Hierosme de Marnes, 1575) and mathematics (although used to prove religious truths) - *Les premiers elements d'Euclide chrestien* (Paris: Martin Le Jeune, 1579). He also commented on the appearance of the new star of 1572 in *De peregrina stella quae superiore anno primum apparere coepit*, (n.p., [1573]).

imprudent in divulging as much as he did about Joanna's returning from the dead to invade his body and restore him. He never denied that what had happened was not real, but only regretted having spoken of it.¹³⁷ He stated:

I would admit for most of my life that it was with great thoughtlessness and perhaps imprudence that I publicly spoke and wrote about what happened to me when this blessed soul returned from heaven to come and find me.... But what is done is done.¹³⁸

He never denied its veracity, however. It is difficult to know the part played by Joanna in his later years, but what is clear is that his sense of mission did not wane as he aged. In one of his later manuscripts, he wrote:

However much I reassure myself, by the continuity of 24 or so years, of my continual labours and desire for the Restitution of all things, for the concord of the world and Universal Peace of humankind, as being the prophecy of the saviour of the world, in the first place I receive <from this world> only Reprobation, not only from the world but from you also, ô happy souls, who have no fear because of your love of the truth, you have clothed yourselves for a while with the cloak of my <mad> impropriety, if it is so, I therefore do not want to leave my enterprise in order to accommodate myself to the wisdom of the world.¹³⁹

¹³⁷Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 21 (1959), 460.

¹³⁸"Apologie de G.P.," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.21. "Je confesseray bien toute ma vie que ce ha este avec tres grande inconsideration et paraventure plus grande temerite, que jay publikement dict et escript ce qui mest advenu quant ceste ame heureuse retournant du Ciel me vint trouver.... Mais ce qui est faict est faict."

¹³⁹"La prognostication de Paris, extraicte des secretz de la sainte magie et vraye astrologie," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.38. "Combien que je massure, tant par la continuite de 24 ou plusieurs ans, de mes continuelz labeurs et desirs, pour la Restitution de toutes choses, ou pour la concorde du monde, et Pacification Universelle du genre humain, come par la prophetie du Saulveur du monde, que je ne puisse en premier lieu recevoir <de ce monde> que Reprobation, non seulement du monde mais de vous aussi, o heureuses ames, qui n'haves crainct

In a letter to one of his protégés, Vincent Cossard, written in 1577, it is apparent that he still felt that he had a mission, which should be carried on by others:

It seems that I haven't advanced much or at all with regard to the great pains I've taken for the cause of the restitution of all things; I don't know any more whether it's due to my sins or because of the bad disposition of the spirits towards everything holy, but I work and I want others to work more and better, since I have throughout Europe students of whom the best are most knowledgeable of men ...¹⁴⁰

Postel continued to want to publish his translation of the *Zohar*, which he considered proof of Joanna's mission, until the end of his life. A deathbed conversation between Postel and Guillaume LeGot on September 5, 1581 was recorded, but it contains nothing that refers specifically to his heterodox beliefs.¹⁴¹ He died a Catholic in good standing with the Church and was buried in Paris in the Monastery of St. Martin des Champs.¹⁴²

et ne craignez pour lamour de la verite, a qui vous vestir pour un temps, du manteau de mon <fol> impropere, si est ce, que je ne veulx pas pour cela laissez mon entreprise, pour a la sageste du monde m'accommoder."

¹⁴⁰BN.ms.f.fr.928 published in Weill, *Vie et caractère*, 238. "Il me semble n'avoir avancé que peu or rien en regard des très grandes peines que j'ai portées pour la cause de la restitution de tous; je ne sais plus si c'est à cause de mes péchés ou en raison des mauvaises dispositions des esprits enverts toutes les choses saintes, mais je fais et je veille à ce que d'autres fassent plus et mieux puisque j'ai dans toute l'Europe des élèves qui sont les hommes les meilleurs et les plus savants ..."

¹⁴¹"De morte G. Postelli," BN.ms.f.fr. 23 969, fols.16-17.

¹⁴²Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 171.

Postel had quite sincerely believed that his message would be accepted by the ecclesiastical authorities as one that was consistent with their own belief in revelation. In his retractions and apologies, he consistently reaffirmed his commitment to the authority of the Church and his desire to conform to orthodoxy. Of course, it can be argued that this is no evidence of the sincerity of his beliefs and that he may have appealed to the Church in order to save himself. However, this is not the complete answer. It was also consistent with Postel's own concept that Authority superseded Reason in the hierarchical order. He therefore bowed to Authority, which he saw represented in the institutional Church. At the same time, though, he maintained his position that Christianity should be guided by Reason. He considered his views to be divinely sanctioned and directed by Reason. Therefore, he assumed that the Church, which in his mind, sought the truth, would accept his word. Postel understood revelation as progressing over time and believed that the Church would willingly recognize a prophet when he appeared. This view was in itself problematic for the Church; he was censured, in fact, for daring to suggest that he knew things that the apostles had not understood.¹⁴³

He believed that he had received divine communication, but unlike some of the radical protestants, such as David Joris, he did not want to break with the established Church. In fact, he would have considered such a move to be

¹⁴³See for example, Givry, ed., *Clef des choses cachées*, 3-5, where Postel outlines his view of progressive revelation.

counter-productive. He was a reformer in the sense that he believed the Church would reform itself as God's message was revealed and understood. Reading his retractions one is struck by his ability to argue that what he believed was actually consistent with Catholic doctrine. When he was faced with opposition, he seems to have been genuinely struggling between whether to hold a position of obedience to the Church or to promote his own views. He believed that he could maintain his allegiance to the Church while promoting his own message, since it was part of revealed doctrine. He expressed amazement that the Church did not recognize his views, because to him they were in keeping with what had already been known by the Church.

He believed in progressive revelation, but was also convinced that this would change the Church from within, rather than threaten it from outside. His frustration with the institutional Church lay in its inability to recognize what he believed to be true prophecy. However, in spite of this frustration, he never broke away from the Church. His belief in its own divinely-ordained authority would not have allowed him to do so.

Chapter Three

POSTEL'S POLITICAL VIEWS

As a point of entry into Postel's notions of gender, it is useful to examine the relationship between his religious vision and his political views. Postel had clearly-defined religious and political goals which intersected on many levels. The interweaving of the two is a constant feature in his writing. For example, in many of his works he tried to prove that France was destined to rule the world and that the Pope must relinquish his claims to temporal authority, as well as that Joanna was sent by God and that Postel was her spiritual son.¹ In both areas, the use of the male/female dichotomy is one of the most prominent features of his discourse. It will be necessary to examine two areas: Postel's language and the content of his thought.

What is apparent when one tries to separate the political from the religious in Postel's thought is that his metaphorical use of gendered language was contradicted by his views of the actual role of women in the world. Symbolically, the Female was the point at which the divine and physical worlds met, yet even though he wrote about "the marvellous victories of women in the new world," Postel was quite firm that a woman should never sit on the French throne. Postel became aware that his metaphorical language was

¹For example, this juxtaposition is clearly evident in his *Thrésor des prophéties de l'univers*, which is a synthesis of his varied streams of thought.

ambiguous and, in his various retractions and apologies, the reader can see him trying to reconcile conflicting views both for himself and for his audience. It is through unravelling his thought and comparing his religious and political opinions that one gains some insight into the problems he encountered in his thinking regarding women and his attempts to resolve them. Such an analysis entails examining three questions: how Postel applied a gendered dichotomy to the political realm, how this related to his notions of power in the world, and finally, what his actual relationships were with rulers of his time. What becomes apparent is that, in spite of his own attempts at consistency, he had difficulty in professing an entirely consistent message. His reasoning became increasingly convoluted as he sought to reconcile his ideas in different spheres and particularly when he tried to harmonize his political beliefs with his messianic prophecy.

A difficulty arises in determining whether his political or religious goals were uppermost. There is neither a clear separation of religious and political discourse, nor a logical progression in the development of his arguments. Often his religious argument was used to justify a political point, such as a fervent belief in the supremacy of the French State.² Many of his writings were constructed in order to lead to the revelation that France was supreme

²His political ideas are outlined in *Les raisons de la monarchie* (1551); *De etrusciae regionis* (1551) [Modern Edition edited by Giovanni Cipriani. Rome: n.p., 1986]; *La loy salique* (1552); *L'histoire mémorable des expéditions depuys le deluge faites par les Gaulois* (1552).

over all nations and that the world needed one King in the same way that the Church had one Pope.³ Even in those writings whose focus was primarily theological, the political motive was always present; for example, a discussion of the use of the Rosary evolved into a discussion of the second coming of Christ, which then led to a call to the King of France to defeat the Muslims in a new crusade.⁴ However, in other writings he began with his political views and ended with his prophecy regarding Joanna, such as in his book on Salic Law.⁵

It is not surprising that the two topics merge continually in his writings. The ultimate goal of both his political and religious systems was the same: world unity. In order to achieve it, both religious and political unity were essential. For Postel, what this meant in both cases was having one head who held ultimate authority:

The primary perfection of all the Republics or states in this world is the true Religion which consists in true faith in the essence of God and the immortality of souls. Because where people obey a prince or head only as a man and a prince, without fearing God

³Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois*, 78-9.

⁴"Du souverain effect de la plus excellente Corone du monde," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.65v.

⁵*La loy salique*, Chapter XVI. One copy of *La loy salique*, in the reserve collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, contains several pages of annotations in Postel's hand regarding his prophecy and form a sort of addendum to the book. For the provenance of this copy, see Claude Postel, *Les écrits de Guillaume Postel*, 59.

as teacher of the said Magistrate or Prince, it is impossible that that state would endure.⁶

Postel did not differentiate between the political and religious realms, and his political message formed an integral part of his cosmology. Postel drew on the tradition of Joachim de Fiore in his vision of a universal world empire, where Church and State would be governed by a universal monarch, the King of France.⁷

Postel's conflation of religious and nationalistic aims was not unusual for the early modern period. A similar phenomenon occurred in Portugal with the rise of the cult of Sebastianism. While Postel was writing about the role of the King of France in a world empire, a Portuguese named Anes prophesied about a new messiah who would create a utopian universal monarchy under Portuguese rule.⁸ A century later, Johannes Bureus would adapt Postel's ideas to argue that the Baltic region was destined to rule the world and in seventeenth-century France, Isaac La Peyrère again promoted the King of

⁶*L'histoire memorable*, fol.80v. "La premiere perfection de toutes les Republicques ou estatz de ce monde est la vray Religion qui consiste en Vraye foy de l'Essence de Dieu et de l'immortalité des Ames. Car la ou l'on n'obeist a une prince ou chef, que comme a l'homme et prince, sans havoit crainte de Dieu comme instituteur dudict Magistrat ou Prince, il est impossible qu'un estat dure."

⁷This component of Postel's thought is examined by John Martin in *Venice's Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 115-22.

⁸Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking, 1983), 107.

France as universal ruler with his messianic theology.⁹ Postel was not alone in his messianic-nationalistic dreams.

As has been seen in other areas of his thought, Postel argued for French supremacy on the basis of inheritance and primogeniture. In *Raisons de la monarchie*, Postel explained that the French (that is, the Gauls or Celts) were the descendants of Gomer, the first-born son of Japheth, the eldest son of Noah. Postel devoted pages and pages of text in many of his later writings in order to explain this genealogy.¹⁰ He considered Noah's sons to have fathered the whole human race; Shem, Ham and Japheth spread outward, Shem in the Middle East, Ham in Africa and Japheth in Europe. Postel argued that the law of primogeniture was established at this time; it was divinely ordained and could neither be changed nor lost.¹¹ He concluded:

It is apparent therefore how through the right of the eldest, the right of the institution, divine right and prophetic benediction, through right of all peoples of natural occupation, through Reason and Celestial influence, and through Reason of sovereign merit

⁹On Johannes Bureus, see Susanna Åkerman, "The Gothic Kabbala: Johannes Bureus, Runic Theosophy, and Northern European Apocalypticism," in *The Expulsion of the Jews: 1492 and After*, eds. Raymond B. Waddington and Arthur H. Williamson (New York: Garland, 1994), 177-98. On Isaac La Peyrère, see Richard Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987).

¹⁰He discussed it in many other writings. For example, see *Resolution eternele destinée au roy et peuple treschrestien* in Postel, *Tracts, 1552-53* (n.p., British Library) and *De foenicum literis* (Paris: Vivantium Gaultherot, 1552), 20.

¹¹*Raisons de la monarchie*, x.

and first Election, the Monarchy belongs to the Princes elected and approved by the Gallic peoples.¹²

Postel could thereby justify the Celts as having the right to rule over both African and Semitic peoples.

Claude-Gilbert Dubois shows that Postel was not alone in his preoccupation with French lineage, but was in fact participating in the general creation of a French national myth based on an integration of the history of the Celts in France into universal history.¹³ It was an eclectic combination of Christian and pagan history and legend. The impetus behind it in the early sixteenth century was the turmoil of the Hapsburg-Valois conflict.¹⁴ According to Dubois, however, within this climate, it was Postel's version of the myth which was most clearly directed toward justifying French imperialism.¹⁵ Postel devoted great amounts of time and energy to constructing elaborate historical and geographical outlines designed to prove his thesis.

Postel had several tangible goals with regard to France's role in the world: first, it was to lead the nations in the war against the infidel; second,

¹²Ibid., xxvii. "Il se voyt donc comment par Droict d'Aisnéeesse, par Droict Dinstitution, par Droict Divin and de Propheticque Benediction, par Droict de toutes gens ou de Naturelle Occupation, par Raison de Celeste influence, et par Raison de merite souveraine et premiere Election, la Monarchie appartient aux Princes par les peuples Gaulloys esleuz et approuvez."

¹³Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois au XVIe siècle: Le développement littéraire d'un mythe nationaliste*.

¹⁴Ibid., 31.

¹⁵Ibid., 83. Dubois also examines the works of Le Maire de Belges, Robert Ceneau, Jean Picard de Toutry, and Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, among others.

it was to maintain independence from Rome. If France did not do the first, it would lose its rightful position to rule and the "bastard inheritors," that is, the Muslims, would take its place.¹⁶ If France did not fulfil the second, the Pope's authority would be absolute and the French Church would lose control of its own governance. Nationalistic aims underlay his understanding of both the political and religious realms.

He believed the King had a divine mission to conquer the Turks and Postel tried to convince Francis I of this. Postel argued that he was building upon a prophecy which Francis of Paola had earlier made to the King's mother, Louise of Savoy, that her son would conquer the Holy Land and unite the world in one empire if he reformed the Church and State.¹⁷ However, Postel's insistence that the King attack the Ottoman Empire was something of an embarrassment in the current political climate, when Francis wanted Suleiman as an ally. Years later Postel would make the same appeal not only to Henry II, but to Francis II and Charles IX.¹⁸

In order to examine Postel's views of the relationship between the Pope and the French nation, it is necessary to outline his philosophical position, because it is here that Postel argued from the point of view of allegory. The

¹⁶*Le trésor des prophéties*, 29-30.

¹⁷"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel touchant les propos de la mere Jeanne," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.104. See also François Secret, "Paralipomènes de la vie de François I^{er} par Guillaume Postel," 50-51.

¹⁸Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 226.

philosophical foundation for his view on the relationship between secular and sacred power, as well as between women and men, was Aristotelian.¹⁹

In order to understand his view, it is necessary to outline his basic concepts. First, Postel believed in the idea that the universe is directed by a series of "intelligences" which emanate from God. The lowest of these, which directs the terrestrial sphere, was called the Active Intellect or General Intellect, which moves the world. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas equated the idea of intelligences with that of angels and believed that the Active Intellect channelled the divine to a prophet.²⁰ Through Reason, the Particular Intellect of the individual could be united with the General Intellect or world spirit.²¹ Postel believed that it was through the General Intellect that God's revelation is communicated to humanity. This idea had implications for his understanding of the governance of the world. He believed that there were two types of laws: human and divine. Ideally, human law reflects the divine law, in the same way that the sun's rays are brought down to earth.²² The

¹⁹Postel's discussion of Aristotle is outlined in *Liber de causis* (Paris: Sebastian Nivelles, 1551). Vincent Cossard, one of his disciples, translated it into French: "Livre des causes ou principes et origines des deux natures," BN.ms.f.fr.928, fols.1-25v.

²⁰Ben Zion Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 74-6.

²¹Postel's most succinct definition of Reason is provided in "La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.15v.

²²*La loy salique*, Chapter II.

communication between the two spheres was through the world spirit, which Postel considered to be female; Postel referred to her as God's spouse.²³

Another Aristotelian distinction on which Postel drew was that of Form being male and Matter being female. Aristotle differentiated the Active, the Formal and the Spiritual from the Passive, Informal and Material; the former was described as Male and the latter as Female. Everything which was lower than or inferior to something else on a hierarchy was described as female. This dichotomy was based on Aristotle's understanding of human biology, where the form of an infant was contributed by the male and matter by the mother, but it was applied to the realms of ethics, psychology and politics.²⁴

Postel's cosmology corresponded to his psychology. The Active and Passive Intellects were not only divine principles but operations of the human mind and were the basis of communication between the human and God.²⁵ The Active Intellect governed the world of ideas, and its inferior, the Passive Intellect, the world of the senses. Postel also used the terms, *mens* and the *spiritus*, which correspond to the General and Particular Intellect respectively, and the Augustinian terminology of the *animus* and *anima* which were the purely human components of the spirit, the *animus* being male and *anima*,

²³"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.13v. Postel's use of this concept will be discussed in Chapter Five.

²⁴Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "Aristotle and Woman," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 9 (1976), 187 and 212.

²⁵Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 113.

female.²⁶ In his theory of Joanna as female messiah, he believed that Jesus had only saved the male component of the soul, but the female remainder would be saved by Joanna.

Thus there were two concepts on which Postel constructed his theories - that male components were superior to female ones and that woman was the intercessor between the two realms. Aristotle's concepts were themselves gendered and Postel appropriated them as such. In fact, Postel emphasized their gender more than did other philosophers. For example, Bodin also used the Aristotelian categories in his comprehensive analysis of the nature of the universe, but did not use the gendered terminology.²⁷ However, for Postel:

Human masculinity and femininity are the summit and purpose of one and the other Intellect. Therefore in the maternity of the world is enveloped the Intellect Possible or General Spirit moving all things ...²⁸

In Postel's vocabulary, women, representing matter, also represented the temporal power of the King, because both dealt with the physical world rather

²⁶*Tabula restitutionis omnium constitutionem naturalium et supernaturalium rerum*, in Postel, *Tracts 1552-53*, (British Library). However, Postel was not always consistent in his use of these terms and was accused of inconsistency by his peers, because he occasionally tried to clarify his terminology. See, for example, "La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.16v.

²⁷Jean Bodin, *Theatre de nature universelle auquel on peut contempler les causes efficientes et finales de toutes choses*, trans. F. de Fougerolles (Lyon: Jean Pillehotte, 1597), 758.

²⁸"Livre des causes ou principes et origines des deux natures," BN ms.f.fr.928, fol.11v. "Or la masculinité et femininité humaine sont le sommet [et but] de l'un, et de l'autre Intellect. Donq en la maternité du monde est envelopé cest Intellect possible ou esprit general mouvant toutes choses ..."

than the spiritual one. In terms of having real power in the world, it was the inferior position that was crucial, because the physical world was by definition inferior to what was above. An important parallel dichotomy for Postel, which was also gendered, was that of the relationship between Authority and Reason. It is these concepts which underlay his analysis of politics. Postel defined Reason as female because it was subject to or inferior to Authority. In Postel's political paradigm, the King represented Matter and Reason, while the Church represented Form and Authority. Temporal and spiritual rulers each had their own sphere and the temporal ruler was obviously inferior to the spiritual ruler. However, in terms of having power in the world, the King rather than the Pope should rule, since the world is in the realm of matter. Although the King ultimately derived his position from God and from the Church, he was the one who ruled the nations.²⁹

Authority was invested from above, but the power to act lay below, in the realm of Reason. This is apparent in his definitions of Authority and Reason:

Authority is the power to do or say or execute or suffer that which human or Divine liberty, which is always well-regulated, wants. I say well-regulated as much to show that the Divine cannot err, as to limit human will, which, when it is vain or separated from Reason, has no essence or just power.³⁰

²⁹"La nouvelle Eve," in Secret, ed., *Apologies et retractions*, 33.

³⁰"La prognostication de Paris, extraicte des secretz de la sainte magie et vraye astrologie," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.41. "Autorite est povoir ou faire ou dire ou exequiter ou souffrir ce que la liberte humaine ou Divine tousjours bien

He continued with a definition of Reason:

Reason is the common consent and Concord or assembling of hearts or of virtue and knowledge of the heart, in which all peoples and persons in the world of the age of discretion agree.³¹

Authority could not rule without Reason, by which Postel meant consent. These definitions gave him room to be critical of the Church if it was not governed by Reason, even though it held Authority. They also had implications for his use of gender as a dichotomous category. It was Reason, represented by the female, which was dynamic, whereas he used Authority, the male, as a rather static concept. Postel used these categories to address two important contemporary issues: whether the Pope had jurisdiction over the King of France and whether women could legitimately sit on the French throne.

An examination of Postel's views on these two issues reveals more clearly his use of the metaphors of "male" and "female" and how they differed from his views of the role of real men and women in the world. A problem arose because the language he used to argue in favour of French autonomy could also be interpreted by others to mean that he approved of female rulers. Difficulties arose for Postel chiefly because his allegorical language led others

regler veult. Je dictz bien regler, tant pour monstrer la Divine qui ne peut errer, comme pour limite la volente humaine qui quant elle est venne ou separee de Raison, nha hulle essence ou puyssance juste."

³¹Ibid. "La Raison est le commun consentement et Concorde ou assemblément de coeurs ou de vertu et cognoissance cordralé, en laquelle tous les peuples et personnes du monde en eage de discretion s'accordent."

to assume that when he used gendered language he meant it literally rather than metaphorically. Therefore, he worked to be extremely careful with his language and indeed, he strove to avoid being misunderstood.

In substance, Postel's main goal had to do with the division of power and the separation of spiritual and temporal authority. He revealed how the relationship of the religious and secular rulers form a marriage of the male and female elements, since the religious ruler represents the male and the temporal ruler represents the female.³² When the Pope made temporal claims, he was placing the body - the female - above the soul - the male - and this was unacceptable in Postel's eyes.³³ Postel supported the relinquishing by the Pope of temporal claims to authority; in practical terms, this meant the independence of the Gallican Church from the Pope. Postel was outraged at instances of the Pope stealing temporal power away from the King by involving himself in temporal affairs; this was the basis of his support for the outcome of the Council of Basle in the 1430s, which concluded that a Council was superior to a Pope, and the Council of Tours in 1510, which decided that the Donation of Constantine was not a legitimate document, thereby accusing the Pope of unlawfully holding French territory.³⁴ He cited Savonarola on the issue of conciliarism and shared with him a certain contempt for the worldliness of

³²"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la loy salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.3.

³³Ibid., fol.17v.

³⁴Ibid., fol.7.

Renaissance papacy.³⁵ He also approved Jean Gerson's stance in favour of the conciliar movement.

It was not often that Postel discussed contemporary events, but in a short treatise written shortly after the death of Henry II, the "Resolution certaine des presentes occasions et là ou il en fault venir," he discussed the Council of Trent, the Edict of Pacification and the religious wars.³⁶ In this context, he stated that he believed that France's most urgent problem was its relationship to the papacy and that the civil war in France diverted attention from this issue. Postel advocated tolerance between Protestants and Catholics and warned the "grands seigneurs" that God would remember them if they undid His work by not obeying the Edict of Pacification. He was afraid that if attention was diverted from the Council of Trent, the Pope would gain power at the expense of councils.

He used the relationship of Authority to Reason both to justify the Church and to criticize it. Postel considered the Church a corrupt institution, in so far as it meddled in temporal affairs and stated bluntly that the Pope and his bishops were all corrupt.³⁷ Nevertheless, his faith in the authority vested in that institution was unwavering. He stated:

³⁵*Le thrésor des prophéties*, 182.

³⁶"Resolution certaine des presentes occasions et la ou il en fault venir," BN.ms.f.fr. 2114, fols.27-29v.

³⁷*L'histoire memorable des expéditions*, 90.

I have already said that no matter how much the ministers and the Roman clergy are, to the person, the most corrupt state that ever was in the world, nonetheless, its dignity and Authority are holy and legitimate.³⁸

The Pope was the rightful head of the institution, since it was inconceivable to Postel's mind that an institution could exist without a head and a hierarchy. However, he immediately qualified this statement by claiming that he was not suggesting that the Pope should be the bishop of all the bishoprics in the world, even less that he should be a temporal monarch, but that between councils, the Church needed someone as its head. Ultimately, the Pope was not an autocrat, but should listen to the voice of Reason, as expressed in a Council. What this scheme permitted was both a criticism of the actions of the Pope and the maintenance of the hierarchical order. Postel supported the form of the existing ecclesiastical institutions as divinely ordained but believed that within the context they could be criticized and improved to fulfill what he considered their true goals.

When Postel described the relationship between the Pope and the King, one has a glimpse at a paradoxical component of his use of gender concepts. In his mind, the duty of the King was to protect the Pope. Even though the female is inferior, she surrounds the male and protects him. This reversal of the power relationship was one which Postel applied to many different

³⁸"Apologie de G.P.," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, 20. "Jay des-ja dict que combien que les ministres et le clerge Romain soit ... a la persone la plus corumpu estat qui onc fust au monde, ce nonobstant la dignite et Authorite est sainte et legitime."

situations. It was based on an idea he found in Jeremiah 31:22, a verse which Postel cited many times: "For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman protects a man." This reversal would characterize the new age ushered in by Joanna.

Postel described the relationship between the Pope and the King as that of husband and wife. It was the female who actually governed the earthly realm, as the mother governs her family, but based on the decisions and authority of her husband. The King must be governed by spiritual concerns, like the wife who was to be guided by the husband, to whom she is dedicated.³⁹

It is worth noting that, as in other aspects of his thought, Postel personalized his discussion of the relationship between Pope and King and linked it to his prophecy of Joanna as the New Eve and himself as the New Cain. He argued that since the eldest son of Adam and Eve was Cain, Cain represented the Pope while his younger son Abel represented the King. Cain killed his brother because he was jealous of Abel's inheritance. In the same way, the Pope was trying to steal temporal power away from the King.⁴⁰ Postel related it directly to his own self-perceptions as the New Cain:

It's necessary that I, who formerly wanted to possess the goods of one and the other sovereignty, killing my brother for his share, through my restitution have returned to him what I had taken,

³⁹"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.20v.

⁴⁰This is retold in many of Postel's writings; see, for example, "La nouvelle Eve mere du monde," in *Secret, Apologies*, 31 ff and *L'histoire memorable des expeditions*, 87, where Postel accused the Pope of fratricide.

give to myself also that of which I had been made unworthy possessor, which is the spiritual sovereignty of the world, Therefore, since I, having been elected spiritual head of the inferior world and general form of it by repairing the faults of the old Cain, give and restore life to the public body of the world Therefore the very Christian King must have in his realm the right, authority and power, confirmed by Jesus Christ, by his vicar and by the sovereign authority of his Church and through which he concludes the maternal or temporal power ...⁴¹

In the same way that the damage done to Abel would be repaired by the New Cain, the Pope had to restore authority to the King. Postel was probably referring to his own rejection of wealth and status for the sake of spiritual pursuits; he seems to have felt some guilt for his early aspirations. This rapid shift from the political to the personal is not atypical for Postel.

Such a reversal of status also explained France's power to rule other nations. A nation which was despised and disdained by others was actually stronger than those which are more important:

That's why it's necessary that like the Mother of the world, and not like the outward father (I say outward, because certainly he is inside her surrounded and hidden like the soul in the body) the regime, government and preservation of the present world is in

⁴¹"Le nouvelle Eve," in *Secret, Apologies*, 32-3. "Il faut donc que je, qui jadis voulus embrasser le bien de l'une et l'autre souveraineté, tuant mon frere pour sa part, luy ayant en ma restitution rendu ce que je luy avois osté, me rende aussy ce de quoy je m'estois constitué indigne possesseur, qui est la souveraineté spirituelle du monde, Comme donc je, qui estant esleu à estre chef spirituel du monde inferieur et forme generale d'iceluy en reparant les faultes de l'ancien Cain donne et restitue la vie au corps public du monde Donc il fault que le Roy tres chrestien aye en son royaume droicte, autorité et puyssance à luy par Jesus Christ, par son vicaire et par la souveraine autorité de son Eglise confermée par laquelle il deduise de la maternelle ou temporelle puissance ..."

Gaul and protection of the maternal or passive and not the active nature ...⁴²

Given Postel's numerous discussions of France as female, and France's right to rule other nations, it is not difficult to understand that he could be interpreted as supporting the idea of female rulers. In fact, he believed the contrary. In his retractions, he explained that when he said that women would rule the world that he was speaking allegorically.⁴³ Postel was careful to distinguish his paradigm from the real political rights of women:

Having already been eternally ordained by God that the Royal Dignity is the Mother of the World and not the Father as stated above, because the father is the pope or sacred order, in no way does this mean that what was before God made and ordered as the female or passive nature, shall be by the feminine sex practised or made what it is.⁴⁴

Postel clarified his position by making a distinction between the person of the King, a male, and his role, which was female. He stated that the mother of the world, the female world spirit, would surround:

⁴²*Le thrésor des prophéties*, 244-5. "C'est pour quoy il fault du tout necessairement que comme Mere du monde, et non come apparent pere (je dis apparent, à cause que tres certainement il est dedens elle environné et caché comme l'ame dedens le corps) il monstre que tout le regime, gouvernement et conservation du monde present, est en la Gallye et protection de sa materne ou passive et non de l'active nature"

⁴³"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr. 2115, fol.101v.

⁴⁴"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr. 2113, fol.4. "Car estant des-ja devant Dieu aeternelement ordonne, que la Royale Dignite cest la Mere du monde, et non pas le Pere come dessus est dict, car le pere cest le pape ou lordre sacre, il ne fault nullement que ce qui est des-ja devant Dieu faict et ordonne comme femme ou passive nature, soit par un sexe femenin exerce ou faict ce quil est."

... the very Christian male King, who by Rights can only be a man, although the person from whom he derives his authority may be a woman, who will surround the male persons who are the legitimate heirs of the French Crown.⁴⁵

Postel tried to clarify his position so that there would be no misunderstanding as to his meaning. It was by virtue of his allegorical use of gendered language to describe political relationships that he found himself necessarily participating in the current debate on the role of women.

The topic of the rule of women was one of great debate in the sixteenth century. The accession of Mary and then Elizabeth to the English throne aroused disapproval and inspired such works as John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet*. In France, the regency of Catherine de Medici after the death of Henry II created the same sort of animosity, demonstrated in works such as those of François and Antoine Hotman.⁴⁶ Estienne Pasquier opposed the idea of female regents, particularly Catherine de Medici, on the grounds that they usurped power from a male, even though he was a minor.⁴⁷ The debate over the validity of female rulers continued into the seventeenth century and

⁴⁵Ibid., fol.5. "... l'homme Roy treschrestien, qui ne peut par Droict estre qu'un homme, combien que celluy duquel il exerce le regne soit femme et feminine personne, qui a jamais circonda les viriles personnes de la Corone de France legitiment heritieres."

⁴⁶François Hotman, *La Gaule françoise* (Cologne: Hierome Bertulphe, 1574) and François and Antoine Hotman, *Opuscules françoises contentant plusieurs traictez* (Paris: M. Guillemot, 1617).

⁴⁷Pasquier, *Les recherches de la France*, 142.

became an issue during the regencies of both Marie de Medici and Anne of Austria.⁴⁸

In France, the basis for discussion on whether women had a right to rule lay in the Salic Law, the ancient law of the Salian Franks, which stated that landed property could only be inherited through the male line; this was interpreted as prohibiting a female from wearing the crown. Little was known of this law during the Middle Ages. However, in the fifteenth century it began to be used to legitimize the French claims to the throne during the dispute between Edward III of England and Philip of Valois.⁴⁹ According to fifteenth century texts, Salic Law had been adopted by the nobility to silence claims by Edward III.⁵⁰ This was actually an anachronistic interpretation. As Colette Beaume has shown, knowledge of the actual text of Salic Law only began in the late fourteenth century and it was in the fifteenth century that it evolved

⁴⁸See Sarah Hanley, "The Monarchic State in Early Modern France: Marital Regime Government and Male Right," in *Politics, Ideology and the Law in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of J.H.M. Salmon*, ed. Adrianna E. Bakos (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1994).

⁴⁹Edward was a son of the daughter of Philip the Fair and thus had a more direct line to the throne, albeit through a female, than Philip of Valois, who was the King's cousin.

⁵⁰An example of this anachronistic reading of the law is found in an anonymous tract from the late fifteenth century, *La loy salique* (n.p., Galliot du Pré, 1540), 100v. The *Catalogue des ouvrages anonymes* in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris lists the publication date of the first edition as 1488.

into "an official truth."⁵¹ However, by the early sixteenth century, it had acquired the status of a fully-developed national myth.⁵² During the sixteenth century, humanist scholars began to question the authenticity of the texts on which it was based and, when Postel was writing, the issue was a point of some controversy. Against those who disputed its antiquity, Postel firmly upheld the notion of Salic Law as an ancient law given to the Franks by God and miraculously upheld through the centuries.

He felt that the true origins of Salic Law could be traced back at least to the time of the Flood and had been transmitted orally, or written on people's hearts, until it was finally written down.⁵³ He considered Salic Law to be confirmed in many places in the Bible and to have originated in the Garden of Eden.⁵⁴ He argued that it was because Eve desired to rule over Adam, through the attainment of knowledge, that they were both thrown out of the Garden.

⁵¹Colette Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of a Nation in Late-Medieval France*, trans. Susan Ross Huston, ed. Frederic L. Cheyette (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 250.

⁵²Ibid., 264.

⁵³Postel, *La ley salique*, Chapter VI. Postel was alone in making such a claim for the antiquity of Salic Law; others traced its origins to the Visigothic king, Pharamond. Postel probably borrowed the notion of oral transmission from the Jews, who differentiated the written law, given to Moses at Sinai, from the oral law, which formed the basis for later interpretations such as those which were compiled in the talmudic and kabbalistic writings.

⁵⁴Ibid.

For Postel, this was evidence that a woman could rule neither the State nor the Church.⁵⁵

Postel considered Salic Law to be an integral component of France's God-given supremacy over other nations. Postel admitted that some countries had prospered under elected rulers, but saw France's role that of an example to the other nations by upholding this divinely-ordained law of inheritance. One argument that he used in order to prove the divine origins of Salic Law was that, even though it was technically unknown in France as a written law for many centuries, it had been miraculously obeyed. God had never allowed a male descendent through the female line to become strong enough to take the throne.⁵⁶ This proved not only the validity of Salic Law, but showed that God had particular concern for France. For Postel, Salic law was more than a rule for the governance of France. It was part of the universal order, which contained hidden mysteries about the truth of reality.⁵⁷

In order to support Salic Law, Postel also offered a more practical argument, which was, in fact, the most common reason put forth at this time. He argued that women's inferiority made them unfit to rule. In his mind, however, this had more to do with the natural order than with their individual capacities. In his preface to *Description et charte de la terre sainte*, addressed

⁵⁵"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.11.

⁵⁶Postel, *La loy salique*, Chapter XI.

⁵⁷Ibid., Chapter XVI.

to Catherine de Medici, he stated that the inferiority of women was evident both in theory and in practice.⁵⁸ He suggested that it was due to women's inferiority that she was vulnerable to attacks by the devil. The restoration of Reason through woman would be a sign of God's ultimate victory over Satan. He stated that it was natural:

that the more perfect sex be, according to the order of nature, ordered to public government and that the less perfect sex be deprived of it. Because in the same way that the papacy and the Empire or the inferior reign is under the celestial and divine as the woman under the man, also the feminine right and administration must ordinarily be subject to the masculine. This is the eternal order.⁵⁹

Postel's participation in the sixteenth-century dialogue differed from that of his peers as a result of this preoccupation with the natural order. Other authors, who also objected to female rule, brought out practical reasons against having women rulers. One of the principal arguments was the fear that, since a woman would always be under the rule of a man, a State could be threatened if it had a female ruler who then married. The foreign prince, it was feared, would rule her. It was the fear of foreign domination that was often behind the question of female rulers. John Knox used this argument in Britain, as did

⁵⁸*Description et charte de la terre sainte* (Paris: Gaillard, 1561), 6.

⁵⁹Postel, *La loy salique*, Chapter XIII. "... que le sexe plus parfait soit selon lordre de nature ordonné au publique gouvernement, et que le sexe moins parfait en soit privé. Car ainsi comme le Papat, ou pontificat, et lempire, ou regne inferieur est soubz le coeleste et divin comme la femme soubz lhomme, aussi le feminin droict et administration ordinairement doibt estre subject au masculin. Cest ordre eternal."

Charles du Moulin and Claude de Seyssel in France.⁶⁰ What is apparent in such texts is the inherent misogyny of the assumption that women were naturally irresponsible. One fifteenth-century text suggested that a queen might deliberately marry a man from a foreign country as a vengeful act designed to destroy her kingdom.⁶¹ Other works suggested that women were too indecisive and would be unable to keep important state secrets to themselves.⁶²

Postel did not consider women rulers to be deliberately malicious, as other writers did. However, he did believe them to be unfit to rule. In general, Postel's arguments against female rule were not governed by pragmatic issues and dealt almost exclusively with theological ones. They were deeply connected to his notions of France as divinely-ordained by God to rule the world since the beginning of time.

In Postel's eyes, the supreme proof that God had a personal interest in the French nation lay in the person of Joan of Arc. She became for Postel a sort of nexus where he could unite his political ideas with his spiritualist ones. He considered her to be at the centre of God's plan for France. Her mission

⁶⁰Claude de Seyssel, *La grand monarchie de France* (Paris: Galiot du Pré, 1519), fol.9v. Charles Du Moulin, *Traicte de l'origine, progres et excellence du royaume et monarchie des françoys et couronne de France* (Lyon: "a la salemandre, rue merciere," 1561), preface. On Knox, see Susan Felch, "Rhetoric of Biblical Authority," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26 (1995), 818.

⁶¹*La loi salique* [1488], fol.108v.

⁶²Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 73-4.

proved France's superiority and demonstrated that the King of France had the right to elect the Pope.⁶³ Since God brought Joan of Arc to save France, God meant France to be first among nations and since the Pope had forgotten his true mission, it fell to the King of France to take it up.⁶⁴

The figure of Joan of Arc was integrated into his prophecy regarding Joanna. Joan of Arc had been, like Joanna, an embodiment of Christ.⁶⁵ Postel explained that she had been given authority to rule the military because Christ was in her. He appeared in her in order to challenge English claims to France.⁶⁶ Because Joan of Arc had not been heeded, Jesus descended into the Venetian Virgin, whose pious and humble life and service to the poor was the end and purpose of all religion.⁶⁷ It was because they were women that both Joan of Arc and Mother Joanna were suitable means of chastising the existing powers. Postel used both to criticize the Church. He stated that Joan of Arc had been sent down from heaven to reform the Church, but since she was not

⁶³"L'abreuvée parole de l'ordre et droict absolu ou est contenu en brief le Droict Divin Naturel et Civil de l'aisnesse du monde, qui est le fruit du regne," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.9v.

⁶⁴"Demonstration tresclaire que Dieu ha plus de providence, cure, et sollicitude de la France," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fols.150r-150v.

⁶⁵This argument is fully articulated in "Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fols.125-152.

⁶⁶"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.23.

⁶⁷"Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fols.150r-150v.

listened to, France had subsequently been punished.⁶⁸ Joan of Arc became a polemical weapon for Postel to call for religious reform. The fact that she had appeared in Gaul implied that the King and nobility of France must be the shepherds of their people. As well, the fact that Joan of Arc was a shepherdess lent credibility to the claim that Jesus descended in her.⁶⁹ The Pope and the clergy had forgotten their roles as shepherd.

What Postel was trying to do was to find some way of explaining his theology regarding Joanna through reference to Joan of Arc, as well as to simultaneously uphold his fervent belief that a woman could not rule in France. In his scheme the two women filled different roles: Joan of Arc had come as a female embodiment of the King, or the military order, whereas Joanna represented the spiritual or papal order and had come to reform the Church. Therefore, it was acceptable for Joan of Arc to bear arms, because she represented the military authority, but Joanna was a different sort of incarnation, which represented the ideal that the Church is to follow.⁷⁰

The way in which Postel justified his point while maintaining his belief that women had no real power to rule in either State or Church is revealing. Postel believed in the transmigration of souls, that is, that souls can return in

⁶⁸"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.9v.

⁶⁹"Demonstration tresclaire," Bn.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.148v.

⁷⁰"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.22.

different bodies.⁷¹ Therefore, both Joan of Arc and Joanna were manifestations of Christ, who was hidden within their female bodies. Postel maintained that a woman had never actually ruled in France, but that in Joan of Arc something new had been created; Jesus acted through her to save France.⁷² He could therefore argue that women did not act on their own authority.

Postel's views are still more complex however. He was himself capable of political expediency. In spite of his disagreement with female rule, he was supportive of Catherine de Medici and said that she had the right to rule during her son's minority.⁷³ This was of course expedient since he sought her help on several occasions. Catherine may have had Postel released from charges of inciting rebellion in Lyon in 1562.⁷⁴ He addressed some of his retractions to her in hopes that she would repeal his sentence to the Monastery of St. Martin des Champs.⁷⁵ In the preface to *Histoires orientales* he reported that she had wanted to name him as tutor to the Duke d'Alençon, a position which he declined, but he wrote *Histoires orientales* the book in order to thank

⁷¹This concept was found in Jewish kabbalistic texts, such as the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, with which Postel was well-acquainted. Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 83.

⁷²"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.5.

⁷³"Resolution certaine des presentes occasions et la ou il en fault venir," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, 27.

⁷⁴Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 140.

⁷⁵Secret, *L'ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de La Boderie*, 17.

her for her benevolence toward him.⁷⁶ So while he opposed female rule in principle, in terms of his personal relations, he was able to overcome the limitations of his philosophical paradigm which he upheld with so much vehemence on paper.

A similar contradiction is apparent in the question of Postel's actual loyalty to the French crown. Postel continually argued for French supremacy among the nations. However, when Postel was hired by the Emperor Ferdinand to lecture at the University of Vienna in 1554, he began to argue that the Emperor was the rightful head of a universal world empire.⁷⁷ Irena Backus argues that Postel also tried to appeal to Philip II in Spain for help in the publication of a Polyglot Bible and that this was his motivation for publishing an account of the Miracle of Laon.⁷⁸ Bouwsma reconciles this inconsistency in Postel's behaviour by suggesting that perhaps he was not a French nationalist in the modern sense of the term, but rather simply believed in the necessity of some universal monarch.⁷⁹ However, over the long term, Postel never abandoned the idea of the King of France as head of a world empire, in spite of appeals and connections with other rulers.

⁷⁶*Des histoires orientales*, 1.

⁷⁷Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 21.

⁷⁸Irena Backus, *Le Miracle de Laon: le déraisonnable, le raisonnable, l'apocalyptique et le politique dans les récits du miracle de Laon (1566-1578)* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, J. Vrin, 1994), 25-6.

⁷⁹Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 222-30.

What both of these cases reveal is that Postel was, on occasion, capable of acting in his own interest and modifying his universal schemes to changing local conditions. In spite of the fact that he demonstrated at times considerable political naïveté, Postel could look after himself. However, this is not to suggest that he sought personal material gain, which does not seem to have been important for him, but rather, that he sought acceptance of his message.

An examination of the intersection of Postel's political and religious views reveals that he went to considerable lengths to reconcile his theological views with his political ones. To do so required considerable conceptual manoeuvring. He needed to find a way to explain his spiritual experience and place it in the context of the immediate political environment. Postel held what could appear to be, on the surface, contradictory notions of women in his metaphorical language and his statements about the role of women in the real world. And yet, there is some internal coherence to his thought. For Postel the point at which activity in the world actually occurred was at the inferior level, that of the French crown, or that of the role of women on earth. It was the fact that Woman was inferior to Man that placed her in a crucial position in the divine drama. In the same way that the Church, which possesses Authority, endowed the State with Reason and therefore power to rule, God endowed women with various capacities. There was no question that Reason was subordinate to Authority and women to men. However, because the world

was in the realm of Matter rather than Form, the inferior elements played a crucial role.

Moreover, it was the fact that the nature of reality was hidden rather than overt that allowed Postel to play with a paradoxical role reversal. He was careful to point out that women such as Joan of Arc were not given power on their own, but were only able to perform miracles because Christ was acting within them.⁸⁰ Therefore, even though Postel promoted Joan of Arc and Joanna as role models, he was quite careful to say that this gave them no power, which was by definition denied to them by virtue of their status as females.

⁸⁰"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.22v.

Chapter Four

POSTEL AND RENAISSANCE KABBALAH

The single most important influence on Postel's use of gender symbolism, and the foundation of his prophecy regarding Joanna, was Kabbalah. Postel was among the most knowledgeable Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance; his knowledge of Hebrew surpassed that of most of his contemporaries. In order to understand Postel's use of Kabbalah, some comparison must be made with other Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance. Christian Kabbalah as a philosophy does not exist as a coherent unit of thought. Rather, in the Renaissance, various writers borrowed different components of Kabbalah and used it to suit their own purposes. Among the Christian Kabbalists, it was Postel who made the fullest use of the concept of the *Shekhinah*, a female representation of the indwelling God, and integrated it most completely into his own system of thought.

In spite of considerable diversity among Christian Kabbalists, there are still some general tendencies discernable when Kabbalah is examined within the context of Catholic-Protestant disputation. Even though those who were interested in Kabbalah came from varied backgrounds, it becomes apparent that there were some, Postel among them, who used Kabbalah to defend Catholic views on a variety of issues. Philosophical questions of human nature, methodological ones of biblical interpretation and practical ones of

church polity were all points of controversy that were argued within the context of discussions of Kabbalah. Kabbalah was not necessarily consciously used as a weapon in the polemical fight against Protestantism; many Kabbalists were working in the early part of the sixteenth century before the issues became entrenched. However, they represent a trend in Catholic thought that was slowly coming under attack. This chapter will examine how such ideas were discussed in some of the kabbalistic works of the Renaissance. Such an examination will set the stage for an understanding of Postel's essentially Catholic interpretation of Kabbalah, which includes a justification of most of the major doctrines of the Church that were under attack - the notion of free will, a hierarchical order in heaven and on earth, and an emphasis on the role of intercessors, particularly that of Mary.

The question of the significance of Kabbalah for Renaissance thought in general has been debated for many years. Joseph Blau was one of the first to study it systematically.¹ He argued that interest in Kabbalah was marginal, a minor deviation from mainstream intellectual life in the sixteenth century which had little real influence in wider circles. François Secret challenged this thesis and argued that Kabbalah was actually at the centre of Renaissance thought and cannot be considered merely as a curious sideline.² Many years

¹J.L. Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

²Secret, *Le Zôhar chez les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance*, 13.

of research into Kabbalah convinced him that Kabbalah, and the Neoplatonic viewpoint from which it derives, were at the heart of Renaissance philosophy.³

In order to understand the basic kabbalistic notions, it is important to recognize their neoplatonic foundations. In its turn, Neoplatonism had Aristotelian roots.⁴ In the third century, Plotinus had combined Aristotle's distinction between Form and Matter with the Platonic idea of the Supreme Good into a conception of the universe that was essentially mystical. Plotinus' contribution to neoplatonic thought was the development of an elaborate hierarchy in which all things tended upward, where the only reality was a spiritual one. In the sixth century, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite further developed the mystical theology of Neoplatonism with his discussion of the nine angelic realms which established relations between God and the world.⁵

In Christian Neoplatonism, the Supreme Good was equated with the God of Christianity. God was considered to be at the top of the celestial spheres, followed by the angels. Man was placed at the pinnacle of the created, physical world, under which were found woman, the animals, plants and inanimate objects in descending order. The physical world reflected the

³François Secret, *Kabbale et philosophie hermétique* (Catalogue d'une exposition à l'occasion du Festival International de l'Esotérisme, Carcassonne, 1989) (Amsterdam: Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, 1989), 9.

⁴A useful introduction to Neoplatonism is Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁵Ibid., 158.

spiritual one. Neoplatonism promoted an essentially optimistic view of human nature. It was argued that because God is good and He created the world, the world is also good and humans naturally strive for spiritual goodness. This system dignified humanity as created being, an idea which would come to be a major component of Renaissance thought. Neoplatonist thought was therefore an attempt to deal with the transcendence of God, the relationship between the celestial and material spheres, and the place of humanity in the universe.⁶

Kabbalah can be considered as a type of Jewish Neoplatonism. Kabbalah tries to explain how the infinite and transcendent God (*En Sof*), who is at the pinnacle of the celestial hierarchy, makes Himself known in the material world. However, whereas Christian Neoplatonism focussed on the *via negativa*, that is, the unknowability of God, Jewish Neoplatonism had a more positive view of the possibility of humans gaining knowledge of God.⁷

The main problem in Kabbalah can be defined as the nature of the relationship of God to the world or of the One to the Many. God's immanence is visible through ten attributes or emanations, the *Sefiroth*, which are

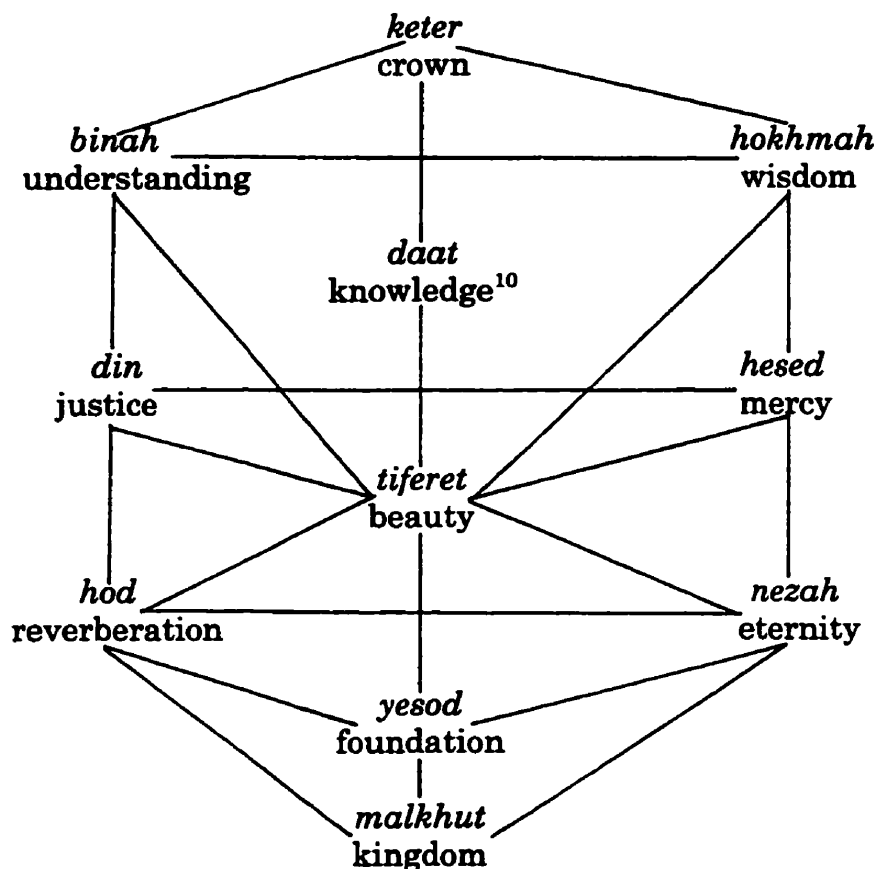
⁶Postel's *Tabula aeternae ordinationis, quaternario constituto inter summae expansionis et coactionis terminos* (in Guillaume Postel, *Tracts, 1552-53* in the British Library) provides a chart of his quaternary conception of the universe and lays out his view of the interaction between God and humanity at various spiritual levels.

⁷Gershom Scholem, *The Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. Allan Arkush (Princeton: Princeton University Press for the Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 327.

arranged hierarchically in a tree. In one of the earliest kabbalistic works, the *Sefer Yezirah*, the sephiroth are mere dimensions of God, but a more sophisticated theology was evolved in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which appeared in the twelfth century. By this time, a description of God's nature had evolved into a description of his activity.⁸ God's action in the world is compared to a lightning flash that moves through the tree of life. The Shekhinah, who resides at the base of the sephirotic tree, provides the link between the heavenly and earthly realms.

⁸*The Bahir*, ed. Aryeh Kaplan, xx.

The sephirotic tree is arranged in two main "pillars" which intersect through a middle column:⁹



There is a gendered duality built into the sephirotic tree, both horizontally and vertically, reflecting both components of God's creative nature. The right column, called the pillar of mercy, represents that which is

⁹There is some variation with regard to the terminology used to describe the sephiroth. This presentation of the sephirotic tree is taken from Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, *Kabbalah, Tradition of Hidden Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), preface (unnumbered).

¹⁰*Daat*, while part of the tree, is not numbered as one of the sephiroth.

considered male, active, or expansive and the left, the pillar of severity, representing female, passive, or constrictive qualities. The middle column establishes an equilibrium between the two contrasting sides. At the base of the tree is found *Yesod*, which represents the male reproductive capacity. It is here that the divine reaches the earth. *Malkhut* contains the Shekhinah, the female presence of God in matter. She is the one who interacts with the world; she is called at times the bride of *Tiferet*, another of the sephiroth. The Shekhinah is portrayed as God's mediator on earth; it was said that He gave her to the world as a promise that He would not abandon it.¹¹

Kabbalah seeks an explanation for the presence of evil in a creation from a good God. The dual nature postulated in Kabbalah also serves to explain the problem of the existence of evil. More than any other branch of Judeo-Christian thought, Kabbalah accepts the reality of evil as a component of creation and considers it a necessary part of creation, a reflection on the dualistic nature of reality. Evil is represented by the male figure Sama'el and the female figure Lilith, who are counterparts to Tiferet and the Shekhinah.¹²

The concept of the Shekhinah is not exclusively kabbalistic; it is also found in talmudic writings where it is used as a symbol of God's presence in

¹¹*Zohar, the Book of Enlightenment*, trans. Daniel Matt (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 154.

¹²*Ibid.*, 56 and 78.

the world.¹³ However, in rabbinic sources, the Shekhinah is not presented as feminine; this is the unique development and the most important innovation of kabbalistic thought.¹⁴ The idea of the Shekhinah has parallels with the Jewish notion of *Sophia* or Wisdom. Gnostic literature described Sophia as the female creator of the material world and told the myth of her fall, repentance and redemption. Therefore, some historians have postulated gnostic origins of early Kabbalah.¹⁵

What differentiates Kabbalah from other dualistic systems is the emphasis placed on the human ability to influence God through human action. Because the human soul is still considered to be linked to the divine world, God is affected by activity that takes place on earth. God is seen as suffering for the sins of humanity through the *Shekhinta b'Galuta*, the Shekhinah in

¹³Michael Lodahl emphasizes the continuum between midrashic and kabbalistic interpretation. Michael E. Lodahl, *Shekhinah Spirit: Divine Presence in Jewish and Christian Religion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 97.

¹⁴Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 229.

¹⁵The origins of Kabbalah, like other esoteric traditions, are elusive. It may have developed from a combination of pythagorean thought, gnosticism, hermeticism and neoplatonism and been practiced in Palestine during the Talmudic period. The *Sefer Yezirah* (Book of Creation) may date from between the third and sixth centuries C.E., but the main books were written in the twelfth or thirteenth century, such as the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Luminous Book), and the largest, *Zohar* (Book of Splendour). They are all available in English translation. A useful introduction is Lawrence Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 305-59.

exile.¹⁶ When God created the world, He lost part of Himself and He continues to feel the pain and separation of sin.¹⁷ Although this idea is to some extent present in Jewish thought in general, what is emphasized in Kabbalah is the notion that God's own behaviour is contingent on that of human behaviour.¹⁸ The implication is present that humans have considerable power, not only in the world, but in the heavens, and that they have both the freedom to decide their fate and the responsibility to choose wisely. This concept runs through Kabbalah and has important implications for Renaissance Christian Kabbalah.

The links between Jewish Kabbalah and Christian thought were made as early as the thirteenth century, by the Jewish philosopher Abraham Abulafia.¹⁹ Abulafia was the first to bridge the gap between kabbalistic Judaism and Christianity by seeing a parallel between the first three Sephiroth and the Trinity. His goal was to convert Christians to Judaism through Kabbalah.²⁰ However, what his scheme permitted was the reverse. Christians would begin to use Kabbalah as a tool to argue that the truth of

¹⁶*The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, ed. Isaiah Tishby, trans., David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Vol. II, 539 ff.

¹⁷Lodahl, *Shekhinah Spirit*, 89.

¹⁸Lawrence Fine, "Introduction," *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, the Beginning of Wisdom*, trans. Lawrence Fine (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 8.

¹⁹Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 16.

²⁰Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 141.

Christianity was contained in the Jewish mystical texts.²¹ Abulafia's Kabbalah provided access to mystical truths through philosophy rather than through Jewish ethics and law and therefore made Kabbalah into a universal system of belief, accessible to Christians in a way in which talmudic Judaism was not.²²

Kabbalah would also be used as a bridge between the two faiths by the Marranos in the sixteenth century. They often found themselves caught between Judaism and Christianity. To exiled Marranos, who had been brought up as Christians in Spain, the identification of the Godhead with the first three sephiroth facilitated their return to Judaism.²³ Jewish Kabbalah experienced a Renaissance in the sixteenth century among the émigrés from Spain and Portugal. The most important Jewish kabbalistic centre was in the town of Safed in Palestine, under the leadership of Joseph Karo, Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria.²⁴ Marranos and Jews began to move there after it came under Ottoman control in 1516. Luria emphasized the fragmentation of the world

²¹Christian kabbalists generally identified the Trinity with the highest three sephiroth: the Father with *keter*, the Son with *hokmah* and the Holy Spirit with *binah*. Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 142.

²²Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Cooperman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 189.

²³Jerome Friedman, "New Christian Alternatives," in *The Expulsion of the Jews: 1492 and After*, eds. Raymond B. Waddington and Arthur H. Williamson (New York: Garland, 1994), 24-5.

²⁴Fine, "Kabbalistic Texts," in *Back to the Sources*, 341.

and the need for reparation. This message appealed to Jews and Marranos who were trying to understand their own history. He emphasized the importance of people in bringing about the arrival of the Messiah on earth, through studying Kabbalah and doing good works.²⁵ With its strong messianic component, Lurianic Kabbalah set the stage for the Sabbatian movement of the seventeenth century.²⁶

Kabbalah appealed both to Jews and Marranos from the Iberian peninsula who used the mythical elements of Kabbalah to make sense of their recent misfortunes. As well, it attracted Christian humanists who sought to reclaim the ancient traditions which had been lost in the Middle Ages.²⁷ However, Jewish and Christian Kabbalah seem to have followed independent paths in the sixteenth century and there was little intersection between them until late in the century.²⁸ Most scholars remark upon their different purposes and goals.²⁹ Jewish Kabbalah emphasized devotion, good works and ascetic

²⁵Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 22.

²⁶Lawrence Fine, "Introduction," in *Safed Spirituality*, 4; Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 44-5.

²⁷Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 188.

²⁸By the end of the century one can find individuals like Abraham Cohn De Herrera, a descendent of Spanish Marranos, who attempted a synthesis from the Jewish perspective. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 257. Israel Sarug introduced lurianic Kabbalah to Italy in the same period. Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 227.

²⁹Léon Gorny, *La Kabbale: Kabbale juive et cabale chrétienne* (Paris: Ed. Pierre Belfond, 1977), 275.

living as the means to bring about the return of the Messiah. Christian Kabbalah was more of an intellectual system than an ethical or devotional one. Jewish Kabbalists scorned Christian Kabbalah and disliked the superimposition of the Trinity on the Sephiroth.

However, there was some common ground. For both Jews and Christians, Kabbalah answered some of the dilemmas of their time. It was a way to explain the rift between God and humanity, the presence of evil in the world, and the breakdown of order. At the same time, it provided a message of hope in that it gave people the capacity to believe that they could have an effect on the outcome of events. Both streams placed considerable emphasis on people's ability to control their own destiny. Thus, two underlying themes are present in both Jewish and Christian Kabbalah: the need to develop an overarching scheme which would unite all ancient knowledge and the need to empower humans to act in the world.³⁰ Both reflect a psychological need to bring about some sort of order and control.

Christian Kabbalah was a combination of Jewish Kabbalah and Christian Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism had been revived in Western Europe early in the fifteenth century, when the works of Plato were translated into

³⁰Moshe Idel identifies the parallel philosophical bent in Jewish and Christian Kabbalah in Italy. Moshe Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 358.

Latin by Marsilio Ficino.³¹ Ficino had recovered neoplatonic philosophy, and combined it with pythagorean and hermetic knowledge, the *prisca theologia*, which he believed to be the secret knowledge that had been lost to the West in the Middle Ages.³² One of Ficino's disciples was Pico della Mirandola, who would become the first Christian Kabbalist of the Renaissance.³³

Pico took the step of integrating Kabbalah into the synthesis which Ficino had already conceived.³⁴ Like Ficino, he believed that all ancient thought could be harmonized with Christianity. Through his Hebrew teacher,

³¹The writings of Plato had been reintroduced to the western world through the Greeks. The ecumenical council of 1438 in Florence is often considered a significant point because it brought together east and west and introduced Greek writings to the Latin world. Florence would become the heart of the neoplatonic revival after the Medici family, who controlled the city, hired Ficino. Frances Yates, *Renaissance and Reform: The Italian Connection* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 8.

³²Jerome Friedman, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity: New Christians and Christian-Hebraica in Early Modern Europe," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, eds. Richard H. Popkin and Gordon M. Weiner (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 36.

³³There is some debate on this point. Bernard McGinn argues that there are precedents found in the anti-Jewish polemical treatises of the medieval period, such as those of Petrus Alfonsi and Peter of Blois. Bernard McGinn, "Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 14. However, their purpose was quite different from that of Pico.

³⁴Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 198.

Alemanno, Pico recovered the ancient sources of Jewish thought.³⁵ Pico also believed that he could prove the doctrines of the Incarnation of Christ and the Trinity through Kabbalah. For Christian humanists, Kabbalah would become an overarching system, a means of uniting Hebrew, Christian and pagan traditions.³⁶ In their minds, the fact that a synthesis was possible proved the truth of Christianity. Because Christianity was considered universally true, other forms of knowledge confirmed it and could be grafted on to it.

The Italian kabbalistic movement was influenced primarily by Pico.³⁷ Pico's most famous student was Johann Reuchlin, who wrote the first complete Christian kabbalistic works, *De Verbo mirifico* in 1494 and *De arte cabbalistica* in 1517. In *De verbo mirifico*, Reuchlin demonstrated how the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of God, could be transformed into the name of Jesus, showing that he was indeed the Word of God. Pico had known very little Hebrew and Reuchlin was the first to work with the Hebrew texts themselves; for this reason he is often considered the first major Christian Kabbalist.

³⁵Richard H. Popkin, "Theories of Knowledge," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 675.

³⁶William Bouwsma, "Postel and the Significance of Renaissance Cabalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15 (1954), 219; Friedman, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 36-7.

³⁷Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah," 188.

Among the Christian Kabbalists who collected in early sixteenth-century Italy, the most important were Cardinal Egidio of Viterbo, Pierre Galatin, Francesco Giorgio and Paul Rici. Viterbo is considered one of the most ardent humanists among the Christian kabbalists of the sixteenth century; his work was supported by Pope Clement VII. Postel was influenced by all of these thinkers, but perhaps especially by Galatin, who provided him with the idea of the *pape angelique*.³⁸ Postel's disciple, Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, translated Giorgio's *Harmonia mundi* into French and his brother Nicolas wrote a preface for it.³⁹

Postel's knowledge of Kabbalah was developed in these Italian circles, although his awareness of Kabbalah predates his arrival in Italy in 1544. He refers to it as early as 1538 in *Linguarum duodecim*, where he states that a Jewish physician gave him a copy of a kabbalistic work in Constantinople.⁴⁰ By 1537 Postel was already acquainted with Daniel Bomberg and had access to Hebrew books in Venice, where he found both the *Zohar* and the *Bahir*.⁴¹ However, Postel's education in Kabbalah was further developed in Italy after his expulsion from the Jesuits in 1545. In Rome he became friends with Andreas Masius, the Belgian Hebrew scholar who would become his continual

³⁸Secret, "Guillaume Postel et les courants prophétiques," 379.

³⁹Francesco Giorgio, *L'harmonie du monde*, trans. Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie (Paris: Jean Macé, 1578).

⁴⁰*Linguarum duodecim*, fol.Biiii.

⁴¹Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 26.

correspondent, and with Johann Widmanstadt, who was a student of Cardinal Egidio of Viterbo.⁴² Widmanstadt and Postel both had access to the Cardinal's library.⁴³ With his gift for languages already well-developed, Postel acquired a knowledge of kabbalistic sources which was superior to that which Pico or even Reuchlin could have claimed.⁴⁴

This interest in Kabbalah on the part of scholars like Postel, Galatin, Egidio and Giorgio reflected a general interest in Hebrew studies, an essential component of Renaissance humanism.⁴⁵ Jewish teachers were eagerly sought out in the early sixteenth century, for both translation and instruction.⁴⁶ The link between a concern for the preservation of Hebrew texts and an interest in their content is demonstrated in the famous defense of Hebrew books by Johann Reuchlin against Johann Pfefferkorn, a Dominican priest of Jewish descent, who argued for the burning of Hebrew books.⁴⁷ Among Renaissance intellectuals, Hebrew was believed to be important because it was the first

⁴²Bouwsma, *Concordia Mundi*, 14.

⁴³Weill, *Vie et caractère de Guillaume Postel*, 39.

⁴⁴Bouwsma, "Postel and the Significance of Renaissance Cabalism," 220.

⁴⁵Secret describes the richness of the private libraries in Italy in the sixteenth century, regarding Hebrew and kabbalistic texts, such as those of Francesco Giorgio and Daniel Bomberg. Secret, "Introduction," in *Guillaume Postel et son interprétation du Candélabre de Moïse*, 12.

⁴⁶Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 188.

⁴⁷G. Lloyd Jones, "Introduction" to Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, [1517] trans. Martin and Sarah Goodman (New York: Abaris Books, 1983), 9.

language which God gave to Adam and was considered sacred. Some believed that the letters themselves contained magical power.

Kabbalah represented the knowledge of the ancients, which had been transmitted first to Adam, then in turn to Moses, Pythagoras, Plato, Hermes Trismegistes and Jesus. Among Jews, Kabbalah was considered to be part of the oral tradition that had been communicated directly to Moses at Sinai and passed down through the centuries.⁴⁸ Some Christian Kabbalists, including Reuchlin, believed that Kabbalah began with Adam and that his act of naming the animals represented a knowledge of the secret meaning of the Hebrew language.⁴⁹ Postel believed that the *Zohar*, the most extensive kabbalistic text, had been given to the seventy-two listeners of Moses orally and written down by Simeon, the prophet who had held the baby Jesus in the temple.⁵⁰

At the root of Kabbalah rests the conviction that the Hebrew language is sacred and therefore magical. From this premise is derived the practice of *Gematria* or Hebrew numerology. Although Renaissance magic was broader than Kabbalah, much of it was kabbalistic in origin.⁵¹ In his analysis of Pico,

⁴⁸François Secret, "Aristote et les Kabbalistes Chrétiens de la Renaissance," in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance* (XVI^e Colloque International de Tours) (Paris: J. Vrin, 1976), 279.

⁴⁹Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), 96.

⁵⁰Luke 2:33-5. See Postel's *Candélabre de Moïse en hébreu, latin, italien et français*, 382 and Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance*, 178-9.

⁵¹Idel, "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 191.

David Ruderman argues that kabbalistic magic represented power and provided men with the ability to control their environment and shape their destiny.⁵² Ultimately, the search for knowledge was a search for power. In *De Verbo Mirifico*, Reuchlin argued that through the use of Hebrew, people could perform miracles, and that this was a sign that humans had the capacity to become divine.⁵³

This sense that one was able to control the environment was accompanied by a sense that one was capable of attaining one's own salvation through moral and spiritual development. The assumption behind Kabbalah was that humans had been given free choice and free will. Kabbalah emphasized human potential and permitted some notion of control.⁵⁴ The Renaissance emphasis on humanity as the centre of the cosmos, which every textbook mentions, finds its epicentre in this stream of thought. Like other spiritualist systems, it made humanity responsible for its own spiritual and moral destiny. In Kabbalah, man was able to ascend the spiritual ladder and become like God.

⁵²David Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," in Albert Rabil Jr., *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*. Vol II: Humanism in Italy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 399.

⁵³Friedman, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 37.

⁵⁴Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance," 400.

It is difficult to generalize about the attraction to Kabbalah by Renaissance intellectuals. François Secret disagreed with Joseph Blau's attempts to suggest that Kabbalah appealed to Franciscans, who had a history of Joachimite thought; Secret argued that it appealed equally to Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians and Jesuits.⁵⁵ Léon Gorny, whose work is somewhat derivative of Secret's, has similarly refused to generalize and has argued that each Christian Kabbalist had his own reasons for being attracted to Kabbalah.⁵⁶ According to Gorny's characterization, Pico saw Kabbalah as a hermeneutic tool for biblical interpretation, Reuchlin considered it a way to interest Christians in Jewish books, and Agrippa's interest was in magic and numerology.⁵⁷ Galatin, who was the most evangelical of the Christian kabbalists, used it as anti-Jewish polemic. Paul Rici was the most purely mystical of the group and Egidio of Viterbo the most humanistic; he composed his *Shekhina* to aid the reform of the church.⁵⁸ Jean Thénaud, one of the earliest French Kabbalists, disliked Kabbalah as magic, but he used the system of correspondences as an argument in favour of free will.⁵⁹ Postel's

⁵⁵Secret, François, "Les Jesuites et le kabbalisme chrétien à la Renaissance," *BHR*, 20 (1958), 542; Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens*, Chapter 10.

⁵⁶Gorny, *La Kabbale*, 113.

⁵⁷Ibid., 128 and 135.

⁵⁸Ibid., 141.

⁵⁹Ibid., 193.

attraction to Kabbalah arose from its emphasis on the relationship between God and the world, its attempt to order or systematize the universe, and from its conviction that everything naturally rose up through this order. Of course, as has been stated, he also believed it foretold the coming of the New Eve.

In spite of Secret's and Gorny's reluctance to generalize about the nature of Christian Kabbalah, what is striking, amidst the variation, is the extent to which Kabbalah was used, not only to confirm Christian doctrine, but specifically Catholic doctrine, and particularly a Catholic mysticism that came under attack in the Reformation. While it is not possible to state absolutely that Kabbalists were Catholics and those opposed were Protestants, it is possible to find this tendency.

It could sound tautological to suggest that Kabbalah appealed to people who were open to mysticism. However, by examining the underlying framework of the mystical mind, this statement has some value. For those who retained a medieval viewpoint, who saw the earth as a mirror of the heavens, Kabbalah could be attractive. For others, whose concerns were with understanding the Christianity of the New Testament and purging the Church of "superstition," Kabbalah had little appeal.

There were Catholics attracted to Kabbalah who also had some Protestant sympathies, such as Agrippa, Galatin and Postel himself. However, Erasmus considered Kabbalah to be at best, a waste of time, and at worst,

dangerous.⁶⁰ Those Protestants who were favourable to it tended to be on the radical wing of the spectrum, such as Bomberg, Oporing and Pellican. There were also Protestant mystics who favoured Kabbalah, such as Jacobo Brocardo and Raphael Goetz.⁶¹ However, many Protestants were less attracted to it. Even Protestant hebraicists, like Paul Fagius and Sebastian Münster found Kabbalah to be ridiculous.⁶² André Rivet was another Calvinist who considered Kabbalah not only nonsense, but argued that it furthered the cause of the enemies of the Calvinists.⁶³

There is direct evidence that Kabbalah was used to support Catholic doctrine. Rici was attracted to Kabbalah because it confirmed Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, Mary as the queen of heaven, and the mystical body of the Church.⁶⁴ The Calvinist Philippe de Marnix de Ste. Aldegonde criticized Galatin's use of kabbalistic and talmudic sources to defend the

⁶⁰See his letter to Wolfgang Capiro in 1518 and to Thomas Wolsey in 1519. *La Correspondance d'Erasmus*, III, 1517-1519, trans. Aloïs Gerlo (Brussels: University Press, 1975), 273-4 and 607. His attitude softened somewhat upon making the acquaintance of Paul Rici. The issue is discussed in Simon Markish, *Erasmus et les Juifs*, trans. Mary Fretz (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1979), 133-4 and Werner L. Gundersheimer, "Erasmus, Humanism, and the Christian Cabala," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 26 (1963), 39.

⁶¹Gorny, *La Kabbale*, 244.

⁶²Friedman, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 49.

⁶³Geneviève Javary, "Panorama de la kabbale chrétienne en France au XVI^e et au XVII^e siècles," in *Kabbalistes chrétiens* (Cahiers de l'Hermetisme), ed. Ernst Benz et al. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), 83.

⁶⁴Gorny, *La Kabbale*, 151.

doctrines concerning the Virgin Mary.⁶⁵ Jean Thénaud differentiated what he called the Catholic Cabala from the "superstitious cabala" which he considered to have derived "from the darkness."⁶⁶ The clearest indication of a doctrinal distinction is found in the person of Jean Pistorius de Nidda, a German Lutheran who in fact presented the Lutheran position at the Diet of Augsburg, but whose interest in Kabbalah ruptured his alliance with the Protestants and led to his conversion to Catholicism.⁶⁷ He compiled an edition of the works of Christian Kabbalists which was published by Pellican in 1587 and included his own writing along with Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico* and Rici's *De coelesti agricultura*.⁶⁸

Among those Catholics who used Kabbalah, it provided a weapon in upholding those doctrines which were specifically under attack by Protestants. Kabbalah was called upon to serve not only Christianity in its polemic against Judaism, but Catholicism against Protestantism. Christian Kabbalah can be

⁶⁵Philippe de Marnix de Ste. Aldegonde, *Le tableau des differens de la religion: traictant de l'eglise, du nom, definition, marques, chefs, propriétés, conditions, foy et doctrines d'icelle* (Leiden: Jean Doreav, 1602), Vol. I, 309.

⁶⁶"Pour nostre tresserenissime Auguste et treschrestien Roy francoyz La sainte et treschrestienne Cabale." BN.ms.f.fr.882, fol.35v. His main argument against the validity of the Jewish Kabbalah was that if the Jews really held the power that they claimed to hold with Kabbalah, they would not have been in such a state of perpetual servitude.

⁶⁷*Nouvelle biographie générale* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1862-66), Vol. XXXIX/XL, 338. "Son engouement pour la cabale et les rêveries mystiques l'ayant brouillé avec les protestants, il se fit catholique ..."

⁶⁸Johannes Pistorius de Nida, *Artis cabalisticæ hoc est reconditæ theologiæ et philosophiæ scriptorum* (Basle: Pellican, 1587).

seen as playing a part in Catholic spirituality which was based on an optimistic view of human nature. The spirituality of the Catholic Reformation was exemplified by the Jesuits, who believed that humanity was perfectible, through the practice of prayer and the use of the sacraments.⁶⁹

The use of Kabbalah by Catholics in the Renaissance, especially in Italy, was not a rare occurrence. In one of his novels, Robertson Davies has one of his characters, a Renaissance historian, expounding on the dangers of studying Kabbalah in the sixteenth century.⁷⁰ While it is a useful premise in the novel (and with no real criticism of Davies intended), he rather exaggerates the danger associated with it. With the exception of Paul IV, the Renaissance popes either encouraged Kabbalah or at least did not forbid it.⁷¹ Pico was brought before an ecclesiastical commission under Innocent VIII which examined his nine hundred theses; thirteen were condemned, but none of these thirteen concerned Kabbalah.⁷² Alexander VI backed Pico and Leo X supported Bomberg's publication of the Talmud; Reuchlin dedicated *De Arte cabalistica*

⁶⁹*Histoire du christianisme*, eds. J.-M. Mayer et al, Vol. VII, 269.

⁷⁰Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, Book One of *The Cornish Trilogy* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 203. Clement Hollier, speaking of a possible correspondence between Rabelais and Paracelsus, states "It wasn't a time, you know, when one great scholar wrote to another to ask how his garden was coming along. It was dangerous; the letters could fall into the hands of repressive Church authorities ... Protestantism was the Communism of the time and Rabelais was too near to Protestantism for safety. But Cabbala could have put him in prison. Pushed far enough it could have meant death!"

⁷¹Gorny, *La Kabbale*, 239.

⁷²Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola*, 122-3.

to Leo X; Clement VII commissioned Cardinal Egidio of Viterbo to publish his work on Kabbalah.⁷³

While both Catholics and Protestants turned to Hebrew sources in the sixteenth century, they used them in different ways. Protestants tended to turn to rabbinic Judaism as the source for Christianity, such as one finds in the anti-trinitarian ideas of Servetus.⁷⁴ Catholics turned more readily to Kabbalah. There are several reasons why Kabbalah could be more easily incorporated into early sixteenth-century Catholicism than Protestantism.

First, Kabbalah appealed to Catholics of a mystical tendency more than Protestants because it provided a universal structure into which various themes could be incorporated. Syncretism is perhaps naturally appealing to those who are trying to maintain the status quo while adapting to new information. Those who desire a radical restructuring of an institution are less likely to consider it as an intellectual option. Catholics were interested in maintaining unity, while Protestants were ready to separate. Second, Kabbalah's hierarchical structure conveniently justified the existing structure and served to maintain a belief in a hierarchical church which called upon the entire plethora of saints and angels on the path upward to God. Third, and most important, in Renaissance Kabbalah, humanity was at the centre of the

⁷³Secret, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance*, 255-6.

⁷⁴Friedman, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 40 ff.

cosmos and was an active participant in the evolution of the world. Humans were able to communicate with God through the sephiroth and the angels. Moreover, God Himself was dependent on human thought and action.⁷⁵ In Kabbalah, humanity participates in its own salvation.

Christian Kabbalists argued in favour of free will by using the idea of the thirty-two paths of wisdom. By mastering these secrets, a person was able to rise to the higher spheres.⁷⁶ Nicolas Le Fèvre de la Boderie described the thirty-two paths of wisdom, which he published as a preface to his brother's translation of Giorgio's *Harmonia mundi*.⁷⁷ Jean Thénaud argued that Kabbalah revealed that a person was a microcosm of the universe, and was thus free to choose his place in it. Thénaud used this to suggest that people were capable of conquering their passions.⁷⁸ Postel held a similar view; the major premise of his work *Absconditorum clavis* was that God created humans to be perfect and gave them the means to attain perfection through wisdom

⁷⁵Idel, "Magic and Neoplatonic Interpretations," 195.

⁷⁶Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala*, 95.

⁷⁷For a chart showing the thirty-two paths of interpretation, see Marie-Madeleine Fragonard, "'Les trente-deux sentiers de sapience' de Nicolas Le Fevre de la Boderie: une théorie de l'interprétation polysémique au XVI^e siècle," in *Mélanges sur la littérature de la Renaissance à la mémoire de V.-L. Saulnier* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984), 217-24.

⁷⁸Thénaud, "La Saint et Trescrestienne Cabale," reproduced in Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Renaissance*, 139.

and understanding. He asserted that God progressively revealed His truth and that it could be discerned by those who knew where to look for it.⁷⁹

The issue of free will, or the ability to choose between good and evil, was of course, a point of controversy during the Reformation. Luther and Calvin rejected the notion that humans could of their own free will approach God. Luther revived the Augustinian position that humanity was essentially corrupt. The centrality of this issue to Reformation debate is illustrated in the polemic that existed between Luther and Erasmus, who wrote *De libero arbitrio* at the request of Clement VII to combat Lutheranism.

Erasmus argued that with God's grace, people could achieve what they wanted. He defined free will as the power of the human will to turn toward God. If free will did not exist, it implied that God caused people to choose evil and, even worse, that some were intentionally damned.⁸⁰ It was against such thinking that Luther and Calvin reacted, with their theology of human dependence on God and helplessness before sin. This is apparent in Calvin's attack on spiritualists and "libertines." Calvin criticized them because they diminished people's fear of God and his judgement.⁸¹ In his treatise against spiritualists, he was clearly arguing against exactly those traits that

⁷⁹*Clef des choses cachées*, 15.

⁸⁰*Histoire du Christianisme*, Vol. VII, 861; *Nouveau dictionnaire de théologie*, ed. Peter Eicher (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996), s.v. "Liberté," 488.

⁸¹Jean Calvin, *Contre la secte phantastique des libertins qui se nomment spirituelz*. ([Geneva: Jean Girard], 1547), 13.

characterized the Catholic Kabbalists. He argued that they call everything the spirit of God and spoke with a "double parole" in order to confuse the masses.⁸² They rejected the literal sense of the Scriptures and permitted new revelations.⁸³ He accused them of saying that God animated people's bodies and that humans could become like Him.⁸⁴ Moreover, they continued to adhere to the superstitions of the papists, because for them, Christian liberty allowed them to perform any sort of external sign.⁸⁵

The issue of free will was a central component of Postel's thought and deserves some attention. Postel's major disagreement with Calvin was over this question of the freedom of the will.⁸⁶ He disliked Calvinism for its pessimistic view of human nature which suggested that people were condemned to sin; he considered it extremely harmful to people's well-being.⁸⁷ In his treatise, "De ce qui est premier pour reformer le monde," Postel discussed his view of Protestantism within the context of French nationalism.⁸⁸ His criticism of Protestants rested on their rejection of free will, their

⁸²Ibid., 43.

⁸³Ibid., 50.

⁸⁴Ibid., 61.

⁸⁵Ibid., 43.

⁸⁶"La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.20v.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois*, 153 and 134. Dubois dates this manuscript to 1569 or later.

dismantling of the Eucharist and their rejection of the adoration of relics. For him, the denial of free will was the worst aspect of a religion which contained many errors. He condemned:

... the wicked opinion of the false religion which removes from God his Special Providence, by Fatalism or forced necessity, which removes from Jesus Christ his honour through the Eucharist, which is abolished and dishonoured by them, and from the Cross its adoration in Celtic Gaul, maintained here more than elsewhere, and what is worse than all the other sins or errors which ever existed, it removes from man his free will, reducing everything to fatal necessity....⁸⁹

Postel's belief in free will was directly tied to his view that, being made in God's image, humans were reasonable creatures who knew right and wrong and were capable of choosing correctly.⁹⁰ Calvinist theology undermined the core component of Postel's theology, the conviction that because God created the world and because God is good, all created things are also good. He created people as the epitome of His creation, made for the purpose of knowing Him and doing good works. This basic theme runs through virtually all of Postel's writings.

⁸⁹Ibid., 151. "... l'opinion meschante de la faulse Religion, qui oste à Dieu sa Spéciale Providence, par la Fatalité ou nécessité forcée, qui oste à Jésus Christ son honeur par l'Eucharistie abolie et déshonorée entre eulx, et à la Croix son Adoration en la Gaule Celtique plus qu'ailleurs maintenue, et qui est pis est que toutz les aultres peches ou erreurs qui furent jamais, oste à l'homme le libéral arbitre, réduisant le tout à nécessité fatale...."

⁹⁰"La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.20. "Lame raisonnable qui est son Image et Similitude avant toute aultre perfection recoit en soy laditte liberte de faire ce qui luy plaist, sans en aulcune maniere estre force."

This is not to suggest that Postel was completely optimistic that people would always choose what was good. William Bouwsma, in his biography of Postel, suggests that he had an essentially pessimistic view of human nature.⁹¹ Bouwsma argues that Postel's low estimate of human nature was influenced by Augustinian thought.⁹² He did, however, recognize that Postel was optimistic regarding man's ability to save himself.

These two tendencies in Postel's thought are neither contradictory nor incompatible. The pessimism which Bouwsma identifies was something of a psychological trend in Postel's own personality; there was a certain clash between his view of human possibility and human actuality. Postel was aware of the depth of human suffering in the world and he spoke of the barbarity of his own time as evidenced by wars and slavery.⁹³ He also despaired that his own generation would arrive at an understanding of the true nature of reality. His understanding of human behaviour resulted from his own experiences.

This becomes apparent in Postel's understanding of the purpose for suffering. Postel interpreted suffering as something that could potentially lead to strength and eventual divinization. He considered the doctrine of purgatory

⁹¹Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 99.

⁹²Ibid., 117.

⁹³See his *Cogitata ethico-politica* published by François Secret, "Guillaume Postel moraliste: Les "Cogitata ethico-politica," *Studi francesi*, 7 (1963), 471 and 473.

to be proof that humans could become purified before God.⁹⁴ On earth as well, if people rejected honour and rejoiced in their suffering, they could become like God.⁹⁵ It was through humiliation that one became stronger:

By making most fervent prayer, devout meditation and vehement contemplation, and in suffering terrible infamy, degrading dishonour and most shameful indifference. And why suffer thus? In order that a man suffers so that one cannot injure him in the most noble part of himself, and the more disdained by this world, he becomes as if omnipotent, and infinitely stronger than the world, showing the fact that God lives in him.⁹⁶

This view was closely tied to Postel's self-definition as a prophet. His theology was in fact a way for him to explain and justify his own misfortune in the world. It was a way to validate his humble beginnings and his own experience in the world. Moreover, such a belief may also have become a self-fulfilling prophecy where Postel placed himself in situations where he would be ridiculed and dishonoured.

Philosophically, however, he believed in the perfectibility of humanity. According to Postel, God desired all to be saved and had given them the means to do so. Postel's concept of salvation had little in common with that of Luther

⁹⁴"Qu'est ce que de l'image de Dieu à laquelle l'homme est créé, formé et fait?" in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 321.

⁹⁵*La doctrine du siècle doré*, (bound with *Les très merveilleuses victoires*), 93.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 95. "Faisant tres-fervente oraison, tres-devote meditation et tres-vehemente contemplation, et en souffrant tres-opprobrieuse infamie, tres-vilain deshonneur et tres-indigne mespris. Et pourquoi ainsi souffrir? A celle fin que l'homme venant à *plus souffrir* qu'on ne le peult injurier en la plus noble partie de soy, et à *plus mespriser* de ce monde qu'on en peult estimer, il soit comme *omnipotent*, et plus fort infiniment que n'est le monde, monstrant de fait que Dieu vit en luy."

or Calvin, where God saved humans from their own unswerving drive to sin. For Postel, salvation was rather the movement up the scale of spiritual orders until one could become like God.

Postel's soteriology was connected to his vision of religious harmony. Bouwsma is right in his assessment that Postel conceived of sin as ignorance and saw salvation through knowledge and understanding of God.⁹⁷ Postel considered Reason to be the tool that God gave to humans in order to raise them up; since people were created in God's image and given Reason, they were able to choose the Good.⁹⁸ This allowed him greater tolerance of other religions than it did other dogmatists. He was essentially a rationalist who attributed disagreement to ignorance and was convinced that once everyone understood the truth, harmony was possible. This can be contrasted with Calvin's dislike of faith in human reason. In his attack on the German Catholic, Albert Pighius, over the issue of free will, Calvin stated that "there is no enchantment more dangerous to bewitch men, than when they have confidence in their own reason."⁹⁹

Postel relied on Kabbalah to argue for human freedom. This is clearly apparent in his *Candelabre de Moïse*:

⁹⁷Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 118, 121.

⁹⁸"La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.20.

⁹⁹Jean Calvin, *Response aux calomnies d'Albert Pighius* (n.p.: François Jaquy, Antoine Davodeau et Jaques Bourgeois, 1560), 41. "... il n'y a enchantement plus dangereux pour ensorceler les hommes, que quand ils se confient en leur propre raison."

In the same way that the Church and all forms of republics in the world want to be linked to God by retaining reason and equity for love of him, so also does the divine goodness want to be obliged to affirm in the heavens what men, united through reason, will bind on earth, or to join what they join ...¹⁰⁰

As further proof he cited the New Testament; he suggested that when Jesus told Peter that what he bound on earth would be bound in heaven, he meant the same idea found in Kabbalah regarding the divine consequences of human actions.¹⁰¹ Postel used the idea that moral acts have direct results in heaven as a way to demonstrate free will.¹⁰²

There were other ways in which Postel used Kabbalah to justify Catholic doctrine. Kabbalah validated an allegorical method of biblical interpretation which was increasingly rejected in Protestant circles. A basic premise of Kabbalah is that the truth is hidden, but accessible to those who learn the keys to knowledge. Kabbalistic reading of biblical and other texts revolves around the general principle that the true meaning of something is hidden and must be discerned by magical means. Kabbalah used the same four methods of interpretation as in the medieval Church: literal/historic, moral, allegorical

¹⁰⁰*Candelabre de Moyse*, 359. "Car comme l'Eglise et toutes formes de républiques du monde veulent estre liées de Dieu en gardant raison et équité pour l'amour de luy, aussi la divine bonté veult estre obligée à confermer au ciel ce que les hommes unis pour la raison lieront en terre, ou de souldre ce qu'ils souldront ..."

¹⁰¹Matthew 16:19. Ibid.

¹⁰²"Qu'est ce que de l'image de Dieu," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 318-20.

and anagogic. Part of Luther's rejection of his own monastic training was a rejection of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation.¹⁰³

For Postel, it was the allegorical meaning of a text which led to an understanding of the truth. It was in Kabbalah that one had access to such an approach. Postel criticized the Talmud, because it:

dissembles the three superior senses [of a text], and generally ends with Peshat, as they call the literal sense,¹⁰⁴ at the point where there are infinite superstitions, falseties and absurdities, to exploit people and hide or distort the truth.¹⁰⁵

In contrast, it was the *Zohar* which allowed people to understand the mysteries of the universe, because it taught the centrality of anagogic and allegorical interpretation:

... the book called *Zohar*, or Book of Splendour, and all the true teachers of the true meaning, leave, hide or dissemble the three inferior [senses of a text], for the true anagogic sense or for the lowest allegorical sense; through these two one can arrive at an admirable understanding of and union with the intelligences,

¹⁰³Friedman, "Myth of Jewish Antiquity," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 39.

¹⁰⁴The four levels of biblical interpretation according to Jewish hermeneutics are: *peshat* (literal), *remez* (suggestive), *derash* (homiletical), and *sod* (secret).

¹⁰⁵*Le thrésor des prophéties*, 199. "Le Talmud ou livre du decret ou decretales des Juifs, dissimulant les troys superieurs sens, principalement s'arreste au Pescat, comme ils disent le sens litteral, là où il y ha infinies superstitions, faulsetés et absurdités, pour abuser le monde et pour cacher ou depraver la verité."

angels, ideas, virtues and forms, through which God dispenses, created and continually governs the world.¹⁰⁶

Postel argued that it was the role of the Church to use allegorical interpretation to find the message of Jesus in the Old Testament and bring to light the truth which had been secretly hidden from, but preserved by, the Jews.¹⁰⁷ In the *Candelabre de Moysse* Postel argued that the message of Christ was implicit in the law of Moses, if the law was read kabbalistically.¹⁰⁸

The superiority of allegorical interpretation was also described in detail by one of Postel's followers, Nicolas Le Fèvre de la Boderie. In his preface to Giorgio's *Harmonie du monde*, he outlined the four methods of reading Scripture. Allegorical interpretation was justifiable due to the parallel structure of the physical and spiritual planes:

And because there is the same Analogy and proportion between the body and the spirit, or ... between the exterior and interior man, as there is between the letter which kills and the spiritual sense which brings life, and similarly between heaven and earth, between the active and passive, the male and the female, the Hebrews understand by this terminology the moral sense, which describes the battle of the flesh and the soul, the tropology which activates the debate between the letter and the mystic intelligence and Allegory, which aligns inferior things with their

¹⁰⁶Ibid. "Au contraire, le livre dict *Zohar*, ou Splendeur de l'Esriture, et tous les vrayz professeurs du vray sens, laissant ou comme dissimulant et cacheant les troys inferieurs principalement, poursuit le vray sens anagogique ou pour le plus bas l'allegorique, par lesquels deulx on peut venir en la tres admirable cognoissance et union des intelligences, anges, idées, vertus et formes separées, par lesquelles Dieu dispose, crée et gouverne continuelement le monde."

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 200.

¹⁰⁸*Candelabre de Moysse*, 382.

superiors, and deals with, as some assure, the war of the militant Church against the supports and partisans of the devil.¹⁰⁹

Le Fèvre's essay is founded on the belief that the sense of a passage precedes the interpretation of the reader and that its mystical sense will be revealed only to those who are ready to hear it.¹¹⁰ Whether Postel's direct influence can be felt here cannot be proved, but is not unlikely.

Kabbalah was also used to support other Catholic doctrines that were under attack by Protestants, such as veneration of Mary and transubstantiation. These topics will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters.¹¹¹ What is most significant is that Postel equated Mary with the Shekhinah and considered her the point of contact between God and humanity. In his description of Mary's activity in the world, "Du souverain effect de la plus excellente Corone du monde," Postel used the same sort of language as that used to describe the Shekhinah. He described Mary as the

¹⁰⁹Nicolas Le Fèvre de la Boderie, "Le Coeur 'leb' ou Les Sentiers de sapience," in Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie's translation of Giorgio's *Harmonia mundi*, (unnumbered pages). "Et pource qu'il y a mesme Analogie et telle proportion entre le corps et l'esprit, ou ... entre l'homme exterieur et interieur, qu'il y a entre la lettre qui occit, et le sense spirituel qui vivifie, et mesmement entre le Ciel et la terre, entre l'actif et le passif, le masle et la femelle, les Hebrieux comprennent en l'estendue de ceste diction le sens moral, qui décrit la bataille de la chair et de l'ame: du Tropologie, qui agite la querelle de la lettre et de l'intelligence Mystique et de l'Allegorie, qui accorde les choses inferieures avec les superieures, et traite, comme quelques un asseurent, la guerre de l'Eglise militant à l'encontre des supports et partissans du diable..."

¹¹⁰Fragonard, "Les trente-deux sentiers de sapience," 224.

¹¹¹Postel's emphasis on Mary is the subject of Chapter Five. His notions of the Eucharist will be discussed in Chapter Six.

maternal spirit and the wife of God.¹¹² She became the sensory emanation of God's essence; he compared her to the heat of the fire, the scent of the rose, the brightness of light or the fruit of the tree. Elsewhere, he equated her with Mother Nature.¹¹³ He argued that Mary works in the world in the same way as Nature does, that is slowly and gently.¹¹⁴ Whether he described her as Mary, the Shekhinah, Mother Nature or the wife of God, he saw the female as the point of contact between the spiritual and the physical realms.

Postel's emphasis on kabbalistic notions of gender is highlighted when his work is compared to the ideas of another Christian Kabbalist, Johann Reuchlin. Reuchlin's main interest was in the magical components of the Hebrew language.¹¹⁵ In *De arte cabbalistica*, he only once referred to the Shekhinah, where he described her as the tenth sephirah.¹¹⁶ Postel also used gematria and was at times quite preoccupied with the mysteries hidden within the Tetragrammaton. Even here, his interest was in finding proof for his gender distinction within the mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet.¹¹⁷ In the

¹¹²"Du souverain effect de la plus excellente corone du monde," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.61v.

¹¹³"La naturelle raison," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.25.

¹¹⁴"Du souverain effect," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.66.

¹¹⁵Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), 72.

¹¹⁶Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, 291.

¹¹⁷"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.11v.

Zohar, the four letters of the Tetragrammaton refer to the figures of father, mother, son and daughter.¹¹⁸ For Postel, this was evidence of the truth of his scheme involving the Old and New Adam and Eve. The kabbalistic concepts which had the greatest meaning for him were the dualistic nature of both God and humanity and the intercession of God on earth in the form of a female. The cosmological balance between superior, male elements and inferior, female ones became the central focus of his interpretation of Kabbalah.

Finally, of course, Kabbalah proved the validity of the prophecy concerning Joanna. Postel translated the *Zohar* in order to show how it predicted Joanna's coming; his commentary on the translation discussed Joanna and this prevented its publication.¹¹⁹ In his preface to the *Zohar* he stated that what he valued about the book was that it, more than any other work, described the nature of the action of the Mother or the Holy Spirit in the creation of the world.¹²⁰ He stated here that the *Mater mundi* was not allegorical, but a real woman. In his preface to a second version of the *Zohar*

¹¹⁸*Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. III, 1361.

¹¹⁹Oporin refused to include his glosses on Joanna. On Postel's translation of the *Bahir*, another kabbalistic work, which exists in manuscript in Basle, see François Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 35 (1973), 87-97.

¹²⁰Postel's preface to the *Zohar*, published in Secret, in *Le Zôhar chez les kabbalistes chrétiens*, 113.

written in 1569, Postel continued to affirm that it was the clearest expression of truth that he knew.¹²¹

Postel was interested in synthesizing the various religious traditions into one overarching system and he saw Kabbalah as a way to do so. This tendency was one of the main drives behind Christian Kabbalah. Kabbalah was called upon to prove the truth of Christianity as it was interpreted by the Catholic Church. Christian Kabbalists were acutely aware of the gulf between God and the world and recognized the need for an explanatory tool which could restore hope to humanity and a sense of control in a chaotic period.¹²² In general, what one finds in the early part of the sixteenth century was that Kabbalah was incorporated into a Catholic world view that came under attack by Protestants. The Christian Kabbalists of the sixteenth century were concerned with developing a system which perpetuated an illusion of free will in controlling one's destiny. This was certainly a key component of Postel's thought, as it was for others. Where Postel differed from other Christian Kabbalists was in his emphasis on gender and his unique understanding of the personification of the Shekhinah in the persons of Mary and Joanna.

¹²¹François Secret, "L'hermeneutique de Guillaume Postel," *Archivio de filosofia. Umanesimo e Ermeneutica*, (1963), 127.

¹²²Bouwsma, "Postel and the Significance of Renaissance Cabalism," 223.

Chapter Five

POSTEL, JOANNA AND THE VIRGIN MARY

In his introduction to Postel's *Les très merveilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde*, Gustave Brunet places Joanna as the New Eve within the context of other women who were considered divinely-inspired, thereby suggesting that Postel's peculiar message was not the only one of its sort. Brunet was correct in placing Joanna's prophecy among those of other women who considered themselves to have been granted special status by God.¹ She is certainly not the only case of a woman who conceived of herself as having a divine role; one can see the same theme in the ideas of the French quietist Madame Guyon, Catherine Théot, who was accused of an alliance with Robespierre, and Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers.² In many of these cases, women expressed their spirituality through the concept of maternity.

¹Brunet, ed. "Introduction," to *Les très merveilleuses victoires*, xvii.

²On Madame Guyon, see L. Cognet, *Crépuscule des mystiques: Bossuet-Fénélon* (Paris: Desclée, 1991), 69. On Catherine Théot, see the *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution, 1789-1799*, eds. Samuel F. Scott and Barry Rothaus (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), s.v. "Théot, Catherine," 959-60. On Ann Lee, see Lawrence Foster, *Women, Family and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 25. A further example, less well-known than the others, is found in the thirteenth-century Italian sect formed around a woman, Guglielma, whose follower, Saramita, also considered her a manifestation of the Holy Spirit and himself as her son. Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 196.

In Brunet's words, such a phenomenon is a periodic aberration in the history of Christianity.³ However one wants to label such expression, it is understandable that within a religious system where women were excluded from authority that they would periodically transform representations of the divine in order to reflect their female selves and especially through that component which was most mysterious and most significant to them, the ability to give life.⁴ The desire to believe oneself divinely inspired is not limited to either sex, but has been expressed differently by men and women.

The existence of such a phenomenon raises important questions for the history of Christian spirituality. First of all, why does such a phenomenon exist? Within Christianity, female figures seem to be used to represent essential components of a concept of the divine which is lacking in the doctrine of the Trinity. The centrality of the Virgin Mary within Christianity is the most obvious example of this phenomenon. Second, is it a phenomenon created by and for women or by and for men? A woman who considers herself divine is something different from a man who considers a woman divine. Third, what sort of approach is most appropriate in order to understand this phenomenon? This chapter will seek to answer these questions, first through a general

³Brunet, "Introduction," to *Les très merveilleuses victoires*, xvii.

⁴The most extensive research on the distinctive nature of female religious expression has been done by Caroline Walker Bynum. See her essays in *Fragmentation and Redemption*, especially "'...And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," 151-80.

discussion of how other historians have dealt with them and then in terms of Postel's views of Joanna and Mary.

Those who have examined the veneration of the Virgin Mary conclude that it is unusual because historically it has appealed to both men and women.

In her essay on Mary, Julia Kristeva poses the question:

What is there, in the portrayal of the Maternal in general and particularly in its Christian, virginal, one, that reduces social anguish and gratifies a male being; what is there that also satisfies a woman so that a commonality of the sexes is set up, beyond and in spite of their glaring incompatibility and permanent warfare?⁵

There is a growing body of literature on the significance of Mary within Christianity which tries to answer this question.⁶ Much of the analysis uses psychology in various forms. Kristeva argues that this is appropriate, because Mary's contribution to the realm of the spiritual resides at the symbolic level, which she interprets as a return to what has been repressed.⁷ Kristeva comes from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. Others, like Michael Carroll, use a more strictly Freudian approach. In general, those who consider the

⁵Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 163.

⁶Marina Warner, *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976); Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, 160-86; Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). None of these works, however, examine in detail the particular historical situation of the sixteenth century.

⁷Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," 174.

phenomenon from a psychoanalytic perspective tend to see the veneration of Mary as a male construct. Carroll concludes that:

virtually every psychoanalytically inclined investigator who has studied religion has argued that the content of religion is shaped by impulses and desires found in the male unconscious.⁸

He suggests that the Virgin Mary appeals to men because she is a suitably-disguised counterpart to the mother for whom they felt repressed sexual desires; this explains why her virginity is her key attribute. He adds, however, that for women, the Virgin Mary also takes the form of the release of Oedipal conflict, because, while a virgin, she bore a child from the Father and represents the daughter's wish to have a child from her own father.⁹ In general, though, Carroll argues that the features of the cult of the Virgin have been more clearly defined by male needs than female ones.¹⁰ Clarissa Atkinson points out that historically, the cult of the Virgin was a male creation, arising out of Cistercian monasteries in the twelfth century.¹¹ She suggests that the

⁸Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 57.

⁹Ibid., 60.

¹⁰Ibid., 56. Carroll's main argument is as follows: The fervent devotion to Mary in the Mediterranean countries is linked to the social conditions of "father-ineffective families" and the resultant "machismo complex" among the men. The absence of the father for extended periods, while he is looking for work, creates in both sons and daughters an intensification of the sexual attachment to the mother which leads to equally strong repression of the emotion. The sexual energy created by this repression is released in the worship of the Virgin Mary who, because of her sexless nature, is the ideal disguised symbol. While Carroll's work is somewhat lacking in historical evidence, particularly with regard to France, his argument is provocative..

¹¹Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, 103.

depiction of Eve as all bad and Mary as all good, a common Christian typology, is representative of the phenomenon of "splitting," in which the child separates the good mother and the bad mother.¹² Whether one accepts the psychoanalytic interpretation or not, what can be said is that there seems to be something in the person of the Virgin Mary that has appealed to male psychology over the centuries.

However, it can also be argued that, at the popular level, there was considerable female input into the practice of ritual and worship. According to Caroline Bynum, late medieval popular religion was largely influenced by women.¹³ She argues that female spirituality was much more concerned with the physical body than that of men and that it had considerable influence on late medieval notions of Jesus and Mary.¹⁴ The heightened veneration of Mary during this period suggests some type of female identification with the figure.

The two views are not mutually exclusive. The attraction of women to the Virgin as a model functioned in a different way than it did for men. It is perhaps this dual applicability - identification on the part of women and compensation on the part of men - that makes the Virgin Mary a powerful symbol that appeals to all. Bynum suggests that one reason for Mary's appeal was that ultimately, the Christian message emphasized those traits that were

¹²Ibid., 109.

¹³Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 18.

¹⁴Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 143.

traditionally identified with women, such as humility, self-abnegation, service and suffering.¹⁵ Based on this insight, she then argues that men and women both use women as symbols of Christian virtue, but men do so in such a way that they play with the notions of reversal, while women have no need to do so, since they directly identify with the notion of holiness and femininity.¹⁶ The same dynamic may have been operating between Postel and Joanna, for the same types of qualities emerge as those which Bynum identifies.

The question regarding the appeal of notions of a divine femininity is also posed by those who study Jewish mysticism and a comparison is appropriate. Among historians of Kabbalah, there is a consensus that it too is a male construct; this conclusion is based on the nature of the Jewish sources as a product of rabbinic culture. Scholem concludes that "historically and metaphysically it is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men."¹⁷ More recently, Elliot Wolfson has reached the same conclusion.¹⁸ Wolfson, like Scholem, points out the rabbinic origin of Jewish texts.

¹⁵Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 279.

¹⁶Ibid., 285.

¹⁷Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 37.

¹⁸Elliot Wolfson, "Woman - The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne" in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, eds. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 166-204.

He also identifies two qualities within the representation of the Shekhinah which would suggest male rather than female origins. First, in Kabbalah, the female is considered "other" rather than an integral component related directly to the author or reader of the text.¹⁹ Second, Wolfson finds that while the female is venerated, she is still considered to be inferior to the male.²⁰ In his analysis of Renaissance Kabbalah and alchemical symbols, Carl Jung reached the same conclusion. He analyzed kabbalistic use of the Tetragrammaton (the four-letter name of God). The letters are interpreted as representing male and female figures; the final letter which represents Mary is associated with what is passive, receptive and non-differentiated.²¹ These two qualities of non-differentiation and inferiority are of relevance in examining Postel's symbolism, who used the Tetragrammaton in this way.

Whether one accepts a psychoanalytic interpretation or not, what can be said is that the symbol of a holy female figure seems to function in radically

¹⁹Wolfson, "Woman - The Feminine as Other," 190: "... despite the larger role assigned to the feminine in kabbalistic spirituality, the androcentric emphasis of medieval rabbinic culture had a profound impact on the depiction of the woman as Other in this major trend of Jewish mysticism." The concept of woman as Other owes a great deal to the formulation provided by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.

²⁰Elliot Wolfson, "On Becoming Female: Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," in *Gender and Judaism: The Transformation of Tradition*, ed. T.M. Rudavsky (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 212.

²¹Carl Jung, *Mysterium coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy* (Collected Works, Vol. XIV), trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 430.

different ways for men and for women, and these differences are born out in the literature. In light of this discussion, an important question to be asked is the extent to which Postel's views had really been influenced by Joanna. If they were entirely his own creation, they hold another significance than if they were created by Joanna herself. Each answer has different implications for the interpretation of the imagery used. A woman describing herself as the divine mother is a different phenomenon from a man describing her as such.

There are some difficulties in determining whether Postel's theology was entirely his own construction or whether Joanna played a large role in it. We have no record of what Joanna said beyond what Postel reported. However, by Postel's own admission, the messianic prophecy was Joanna's.²² He claimed that the things that Mother Joanna taught him confirmed what he had read in the Kabbalah.²³ A reading of *Le Prime nove del altro mondo*, in which Postel related most directly what he had learned from Joanna, in some cases providing direct quotations, would suggest that the prophecy originated with her.

It is clear that Postel was already working on integrating Kabbalah and Christianity before he met Joanna, as evidenced by a letter to Masius in January of 1547 in which he describes a piece of writing on the subject that he

²²*La vierge vénitienne*, 7-13.

²³*Ibid.*, 13.

was sending to Oporin to publish.²⁴ From the letter it is apparent that it was meeting Joanna that seemed to give concrete form to his understanding of Kabbalah. Restitution with God, the goal of Kabbalah, took on a personal meaning for Postel through the particular interpretation of Kabbalah that Joanna had provided.

One eighteenth-century historian, François des Billons, suggested that Postel's theory of restitution pre-dated his encounter with Joanna and that he incorporated her into his system only in order to make his rather erudite philosophy comprehensible to the masses.²⁵ No one would deny that Postel had already developed a sense of mission or saw himself as a prophet prior to his encounter with Joanna. As early as 1543 he had appeared before Francis I with a prophetic message for the King. The same year he published *De orbis terrae concordia libri quatuor*, in which he dealt with the issue of God coming to earth and an explanation of the dual nature of the redeemer. Des Billons was correct in making the claim that Joanna fit into Postel's already well-formulated notion of how the world works. It was not Joanna who convinced him of the general scheme of salvation that he preached. Nevertheless, it cannot be argued that Postel only used Joanna as a foil. The constancy of his message about her role as the New Eve, in the face of many years of derision

²⁴Chaufepié, *Nouveau dictionnaire historique*, III, 219.

²⁵François des Billons, *Nouveaux éclaircissements sur la vie et les ouvrages de Guillaume Postel*, 54-7.

and persecution, leaves little doubt about the earnestness with which he believed his own message. It is true that his political-religious-cosmological philosophy was much larger than his prophecy regarding Joanna, but she was placed in its core after 1553.

In assessing the significance of Joanna to Postel's thought, Marion Kuntz is more convincing than Des Billons. She suggests that initially, Joanna's prophecy confirmed his own already formulated beliefs about world peace; later, after his immutation in 1551, he became a true prophet with a clearly defined message which had Joanna at its centre.²⁶ Kuntz believes that Postel's adaptation of Kabbalah was Joanna's own creation, which she taught to Postel.²⁷ She takes at face value Postel's account of Joanna's message. In order to develop this argument, Kuntz has pursued archival research on Joanna and has unearthed evidence to show at least that Joanna existed and was not a creation of Postel's mind.²⁸ The evidence Kuntz has collected on Joanna's life supports her conclusion; apparently, Joanna had left home as a young girl to pursue a life of service to God and of perpetual virginity.²⁹ Kuntz explains the rather remarkable fact that an Italian woman had some knowledge of Kabbalah by speculating that she may have been of Marrano

²⁶Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 87 and 104.

²⁷Kuntz, "The Virgin of Venice," 91, 112.

²⁸Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 73-4 and Kuntz, "Lodovico Domenichi," 35.

²⁹For this reason, Joanna left her home to dedicate her life to service of God in virginity, poverty, prayer and service. Kuntz, "Virgin of Venice," 119.

origin. Another possibility is that she had been taught by her previous confessor, a Franciscan who may have been Francesco Giorgio. However, when Postel asked her confessor if he had taught her anything, he denied it.³⁰

If Kuntz's interpretation is accurate, then Postel's adaptation of Kabbalah is particularly interesting because it arrived through the intermediary of a woman. Postel's imagery, which is both maternal and corporeal, is in fact highly reminiscent of the late medieval female spirituality described by Caroline Bynum in her studies. This reinforces the idea that it could have derived directly from Joanna's own religious impulses. It may be that through examining Postel's use of Kabbalah one sees components of a distinctly feminine Christian spirituality.

It may very well have been the case that for Joanna, the image of herself as divine mother fulfilled some frustrated longings that were expressed in the mystical realm. Marion Kuntz's research in Venice suggests that there may have been a power struggle at the hospital in Venice between Joanna and Paola Negri, who arrived there twenty years after Joanna.³¹ Gerda Lerner argues that mystical religion provided the sole route for women to speak with an authoritative voice in the medieval and early modern period.³² Some female mystics clearly used their religious influence to enter political debate;

³⁰"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.105.

³¹Kuntz, "The Virgin of Venice," 117.

³²Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness from the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 77-8.

Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden both gave their opinions on the power politics in which the fourteenth century papacy was embroiled.³³ It may be that Joanna spoke to Postel about similar issues. Postel became the vehicle for her own voice.³⁴

However, not having any sources directly from Joanna's pen, it is difficult to do more than speculate on her own specific character and motivation. What can be stated is that what Joanna taught Postel corresponded directly both with his intellectual framework and his emotional needs for a maternal figure. What is clear is that between Joanna and Postel there was a meeting of minds. The theological construct suited both of their ideological frameworks and psychological temperaments. Even if the prophecy originated with Joanna, the fact that Postel became such a fervent believer in it reveals the extent to which it corresponded to his own temperament.

While it may have originated with Joanna, it meshed with a male perspective which tended to see divine women as idealizations of the highest

³³The reverse situation also occurred, where male rulers used popular female mystics to justify their own actions. Such a case from sixteenth-century Spain has been examined in Jodi Bilinkoff, "A Spanish Prophetess and her Patrons: The Case of Maria de Santo Domingo," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23 (1992), 28.

³⁴Lerner also points out that those female mystics who were the most accepted by the church were those who had male patrons (usually their confessors) supporting them. Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 78.

virtues, particularly those of humility and chastity.³⁵ In this sense, the theories of both Caroline Bynum regarding Christian spirituality and Elliot Wolfson on Jewish Kabbalah are confirmed. The underlying assumption of such an idealized view was to place women on the outside, to see them as Other, rather than as fellow human beings. It is not quite the case that Postel never considered women as individuals, as some have argued; he was quite capable of differentiating real women from archetypes. Nonetheless, it was for what they represented, rather than for who they were, that women were of soteriological importance to Postel. It was by virtue of their passivity and their inferiority to men that they became suitable vessels for the workings of Christ. This is clearly apparent in his argument that while women represent Christ, they are unable to hold positions of authority in either the Church or the State.³⁶ The remainder of this chapter will explore the imagery which Postel used to describe both Joanna and the Virgin Mary and the qualities which they embodied in his mind.

Because femaleness was sensory rather than spiritual, Postel saw the physical world as governed by a female spirit, while the male spirit controlled

³⁵This is a common feature of neoplatonic writing about women in the sixteenth century. See Natalie Davis' introduction to Volume III of *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, Vol.III: *XVI^e - XVIII^e siècles*, eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Paris: Plon, 1991), 14.

³⁶"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," B.N.ms.f.fr. 2113, fols.25-26.

the more remote angelic realm.³⁷ This was the foundation of his intellectual preoccupation with female imagery. Postel felt some genuine concern for the restitution of human nature, which required a mediator between heaven and earth. This intermediate position was occupied by what was female because the material world was lower than the celestial spheres.³⁸ Women's virtue is based on their connection to the earth. Postel stated:

Even God (although he is the author of all good) did not know who to give and distribute his graces to, if first Woman, who is the epitome or essence of the elemental, sublunary or inferior world had not produced the animal body to make it spiritual.³⁹

The creative component of God is typified as female and women, by virtue of their ability to give life, hold this remarkable position in the world.

The anthropologist Sherry Ortner suggests that, symbolically, women have often been placed in limbo between two opposing forces, which she defines as nature and culture.⁴⁰ Caroline Bynum, who sees male symbolism as

³⁷"L'abreuvée parole," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.15v.

³⁸See his letter to Masius in *Chaufepié, Nouveau dictionnaire historique*, Vol. III, 219.

³⁹*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 12. "Car Dieu mesmes (combien qu'il est auteur de tout bien) ne sçauroit à qui donner ou distribuer ses graces, si premierement de la Femme, qui est l'Epitome ou Sommaire du monde elementaire, sublunaire, ou inferieur, ne luy produisoit le corps animal pour le faire spirituel."

⁴⁰Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture and Society*, eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 86-87.

characteristically dichotomous, suggests that this is a common paradigm.⁴¹ As almost direct confirmation of this thesis, Postel stated that Mary was the Mother of both nature and culture.⁴² Postel equated Mary with Mother Nature and showed how Mary intercedes for people through prayer. He stated that both Mary and nature work the same way in the world, little by little, with their efforts not recognized until long after the work was performed.⁴³

Given his emphasis on the role of the female in linking the spiritual and material worlds, it is not surprising that Postel upheld traditional Catholic theology regarding Mary as intercessor; for him, she was the prime recipient of prayer. Postel's treatise on the use of the Rosary illustrates his fervent devotion to Mary.⁴⁴ He believed that the *Ave Maria* held almost magical properties. The prayers of the Rosary, repeated once or twice, were efficacious for both the living and the dead and for conceiving children in a sacred manner.⁴⁵ He developed a rather romantic image: that Jesus was conceived when an angel recited the *Ave Maria*.⁴⁶ He was certain that many of the

⁴¹Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 282.

⁴²Πανθενωσια [*Panthenosia*] (Basle: Oporin, 1561), 94.

⁴³"Du souverain effect de la plus excellente corone du monde," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.66.

⁴⁴Ibid., fol.61.

⁴⁵Ibid., fol.62v.

⁴⁶Ibid., fol.61.

appearances of the Virgin Mary and miracles attributed to her were authentic.⁴⁷ He concluded that it would be through Mary that humans approached God and that through prayers offered to her "man comes to the fullness of Perfection, to which we were created."⁴⁸

For Postel the Trinity became a quaternity. Barbara Newman, in her examination of late medieval iconography, has found that portrayals of the coronation of the Virgin link her with the Trinity, giving her the same importance visually that Postel did in his writing.⁴⁹

Similarly, Joanna's role was that of mediator. Although Postel describes her as the wife of Jesus, his imagery is at once both sexual and maternal:

Therefore the principal and unique quality of my mother and Virgin Joanna wife of my father Jesus, is that she will surround him forever, to that end that from him, forever envelopped, hidden and united with her, the grace and spirit of God would be given to all those who are and have until now been damned before being born, restoring them in their entirety.⁵⁰

The restoration which would occur through the unity of Jesus and Joanna would be one of unity and concord on earth.⁵¹

⁴⁷Ibid., fols.64-64v.

⁴⁸Ibid., fol.67v. "Lhome parviene au comble de la Perfection, a laquelle nous sommes crees."

⁴⁹Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist*, 206.

⁵⁰*Les très merueilleuses victoires*, 39. "Donc la principale et singuliere qualité de ma mere Vierge Jehanne espouse de mon pere Jesus, est qu'elle l'environne à jamais, à celle fin que de luy à jamais en elle circonde, caché uny, soit la grace et esprit de Dieu donné à toutz ceulx qui sont et ont jusques icy esté damnez avant qu'ilz fussent nays, les restituant en leur entier."

⁵¹*La vierge vénitienne*, 45.

There were two qualities which both Mary and Joanna shared which validated their respective positions as mediators between heaven and earth: they were simultaneously mothers and virgins. These were both qualities which had primary significance for Postel and thus require some examination.

In the history of Christianity, and in fact in the history of religion in general, a virgin was considered a powerful figure, someone who transcended the material world.⁵² According to medieval notions of sexuality, both men and women were thought to lose vitality if they engaged in sexual activity, so a virgin was considered to contain real power.⁵³ Marina Warner suggests that there was also a mystical attraction to the idea of the virginal body as something natural and integral.⁵⁴ It is readily apparent that virgins have been role models in the Church; one need only glance at the plethora of virgin-martyrs in the early church, such as Barbara, Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia and Catherine of Alexandria, all young women who suffered persecution through their choice to serve the Church rather than marry.

In Postel's eyes, celibacy was the means by which a person communed with God; he argued that a person had to renounce corporal pleasure in order

⁵²Elisja Schulte van Kessel, "Vierges et mères entre ciel et terre: les chrétiennes des premiers temps modernes," in *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, Vol.III: *XVI-XVII siècles*, 145.

⁵³Ibid., 164.

⁵⁴Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, 73-4.

to experience spiritual pleasure.⁵⁵ While this was true for all people, he emphasized it with respect to women. He considered virginity to be one of the major attributes of a female saint. He believed that God worked first and foremost through female virgins, such as Joan of Arc, whom he always referred to as "la pucelle" and of course, through Mary.⁵⁶ Celibacy was the route to spiritual union with God.

Because Jesus was the summit of human perfection, his mother was also necessarily perfect; this meant that she had to be a virgin. Postel explained the virgin birth by arguing that because Jesus as spirit was already coeternal with the Father, he only needed to be born as a body; therefore, there was no need for male seed.⁵⁷ According to Postel, Mary received "... only the holy kiss of the spirit from Joseph and through the Holy Spirit."⁵⁸ Mary's virginity was important to Postel because it was the combination of the human and divine nature within Christ that allowed Him to contain both male and female elements within Himself.⁵⁹

⁵⁵"Qu'est ce que de l'image de Dieu," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 342.

⁵⁶*Clef des choses cachées*, 38. On Joan of Arc, see *Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 22 and "Demonstration tresclaire," B.N.ms.f.fr. 2113, fol.135v.

⁵⁷*Clef des choses cachées*, 38.

⁵⁸"De la restitution," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 157. "... le seul saint baiser de l'esprit de Joseph et par le saint Esprit."

⁵⁹*Le trésor des prophéties*, 147-8.

Given Mary's importance to Postel's understanding of salvation, it is not surprising that he defended both the notion of the Immaculate Conception and the perpetual virginity of Mary.⁶⁰ He stated that her perpetual virginity was necessary for Jesus to have been born without sin:

... she equally had to be without sin, either through Nature or by a particular privilege among the most perfect children of Adam. [She gave birth to the mediator] without any biological brothers with whom his Heritage would have to have been shared ..."⁶¹

He even cited the Koran as also stating that Mary had been conceived without sin.⁶²

Evidence of his interest in promoting the Immaculate Conception and perpetual virginity of Mary is found in his interest in and translation of the *Protevangelion of James*. This is an apocryphal work from the second century, which provides the only existing information on the birth, childhood, and parentage of Mary.⁶³ The *Protevangelion* furnished evidence for both the Immaculate Conception and the perpetual virginity of Mary. It supported the former by recounting the story of Anne and Joachim, Mary's parents, and

⁶⁰"Du souverain effect," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.63; "De perenni, et licet sub coelo sit," BN.ms.f.lat.3398, fol.3.

⁶¹*Clef des choses cachées*, 39. "... elle a dû également être sans péché, soit par Nature, soit par un privilège entre les plus parfaits des enfants d'Adam ... sans frères utérins et sans qu'aucun droit l'obligeât par conséquent à partager l'Héritage ..."

⁶²"Du souverain effect," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.65.

⁶³*New Testament Apocrypha*. Vol. I: *Gospels and Related Writings*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. Wilson (Cambridge: James, Clarke and Co., 1991), 423; Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation*, 106.

suggesting that Mary's conception was itself miraculous. It gave evidence for the latter by explaining that Joseph had been married prior to marrying Mary and had children through this previous marriage.⁶⁴ This explained the existence of the "brothers" of Jesus who are mentioned in the gospels; they were not real brothers, but merely his half-brothers.⁶⁵

The medieval world had preserved the story of the childhood of Mary in a slightly different form. Jerome was acquainted with the *Protevangelion*, but disagreed with the idea that Joseph had been married. He offered an alternative explanation for Jesus' brothers, and said that they were really his cousins.⁶⁶ It was through the use of Jerome that the story was preserved in *The Golden Legend* of Jacob Voragine, a popular work of the Middle Ages. Voragine used Jerome as his source for the information on Mary's childhood, who had seen a small book which told the story.⁶⁷ *The Golden Legend* furnished the material for the cult of St. Anne, the mother of Mary, which

⁶⁴*Le Protevangile de Jacques et ses remaniements latins*, ed. and trans. Emile Amann (Paris: Letouzey et ané, 1910), 36.

⁶⁵Mark 3:31, Matt.12:46.

⁶⁶*New Testament Apocrypha*, Vol. I, 425.

⁶⁷Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (NY: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941), 521.

became increasingly popular in the fifteenth century, particularly in northern France and Germany.⁶⁸

However, the *Protevangelion* itself was unknown as a text in the Latin Church and it is Postel who is credited with recovering the work from the Eastern Church and reintroducing it to the West. He probably discovered it on one of his trips to the East, although he implied that Joanna was responsible for him acquiring it.⁶⁹ In any case, he translated the work into Latin; it was published by Oporin with the addition of a preface by Bibliander.⁷⁰ The work was considered scandalous when it was published and provoked strong reaction from Protestants. Henri Estienne considered the book to be full of nonsense and accused Postel of inventing the *Protevangelion* himself.⁷¹ He argued that Catholics did such things to support the outrageous legends that were taught as part of the Catholic faith but which had nothing

⁶⁸The popularity of St. Anne in the fifteenth century arose from visions of Colette, one of the poor Clares and reformer of the order. Janine Garrisson, *Royaume, Renaissance et réforme, 1483-1559* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1991), 52.

⁶⁹*Le Protevangile*, 164. He mistakenly considered it part of the canon of the Orthodox church. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 83.

⁷⁰*Protevangelion sive de natalibus Jesu Christi, et ipsius matris Virginis Mariae, sermo historicus divi Jacobi minoris, consobrini et fratris Domini Jesu, apostoli primarii, et episcopi Christianorum primi Hierosolymis*. Basle: Oporin, 1552.

⁷¹Estienne, *L'introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes*, 482-3.

to do with the Bible. From Estienne's reaction, it is clear that Postel was involved in the polemic to preserve Mary's place in Christianity.

Postel's elevation of virginity as the highest female virtue is readily apparent, not only in his defense of Mary, but with regard to Joanna. For Postel, the fact that when they met, Joanna was over fifty years old and still a virgin was one of the central proofs of her sanctity.⁷² When Postel described Joanna he was always careful to point out that she was about twenty years older than he and not particularly attractive, except when she took communion, at which time she became quite radiant. Postel was outraged at the charge levelled at him by some detractors that Joanna was his lover.⁷³ Their chaste relationship was mirrored in his theological construct which emphasized union but disparaged sexuality. Psychologically, this virgin-mother may have satisfied a need for union with another without compromising his views on sexuality. Claude-Gilbert Dubois suggests that what Postel was seeking with Joanna was "union without coitus."⁷⁴ His immutation, when she entered his body would have been the culmination of this type of psychological need.

While the idea of virginity was intellectually appealing to Postel, it was the notion of mother that seems to have touched his emotions at the most

⁷²"La Nouvelle Eve Mere du Monde," in *Apologies et rétractions*, 29.

⁷³"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr. 2115, fol.111.

⁷⁴Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques," 189-90.

profound level. The female component of God was Mother of the world, the wife of God who contained within her the seeds of all created beings.⁷⁵ Postel seems to have been fascinated with the idea of the female capacity to bear life, which he argued was ultimately what would save humankind.⁷⁶ The power to give birth was for him the basis of women's mystery and goodness. Originally, Satan's power had been placed in the seed of the woman, but it was made good by God.⁷⁷ Joanna was above all his personal Mother and he consistently referred to himself as her son. Postel, who had been orphaned at age eight and who had no other significant female in his life, found in Joanna both a kindred spirit and a mother.

In the midst of his treatise on Salic Law his writing becomes highly charged with a sense of the mystery of restitution with the mother, who would rescue him from exile:

... we too groan, waiting for the redemption and Restitution of our body, which, before it was in our mortal mother had already been created, formed and made in his Idea, before we were engendered. Because before the constitution of the world we were all in our common Mother preknown and preordained for the good works that we would do in the world ... And because we follow our first parents, we want, through self-love, to look outside of ourself, and as a result we have been expelled from our terrestrial paradise,

⁷⁵"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la loy salike," BN.ms.f.fr. 2113, fol.13v.

⁷⁶For example, "La loi éternelle," in Secret, ed, *Apologies et rétractions*, 98-9.

⁷⁷*Les très merueilleuses victoires*, 11.

and placed under the law of expulsion, of the hunt, of banishment and exile.⁷⁸

In this expressive passage, it is apparent that he took some comfort in the idea that he was known to the mother even before he was born. His sense of human suffering and sense of exile surely arose from his own personal experience, both as a child and an adult.⁷⁹ Postel concluded his treatise on Mary, "Du souverain effect de la plus excellente Corone du monde," with this metaphor:

The Mother of mothers who is under the Eternal Father contains us in herself, like the hen her chicks, because she is the heart under the head, or like the King under the Pope ...⁸⁰

⁷⁸"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.15. "... nous aussi gemissons attendant la redemption et Restitution de nostre corps, lequel avant qu'il fust dedens notre mortele mere havoit desia este Moulé Forme et Faict en son Idee, devant que nous fussions engendrez. Car devant la constitution du monde nous estions toutz en notre dicte comune Mere precognues et preordonnes pour les bonnes oeuvres que nous debvions faire en ce monde. ... Et parce que nous suyvant nos premiers parentz, nous sommes par amour propre voulu chercher dehors de nous, nous havons este chasses de notre terrestre paradis, et mis soubz la Loy d'Expulsion, de Chasseur, de bannissement, et dexil ..."

⁷⁹These ideas are reiterated in "L'abreuvé parole de l'ordre et droict absolu," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.18.

⁸⁰"Du souverain effect," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.67v. "La Mere des meres qui au dessoubz du Pere Ethernel nous contient en Soy, come la poule ses pouletz, a cause quelle est come le Coeur soubz le chef, ou come le Roy soubz la Pape ..."

The image of maternity pervades even Postel's descriptions of Jesus himself.⁸¹ In his theology, Jesus contained his female counterpart within him. Postel used an elaborate maternal imagery to describe the role of Jesus in his description of the four vigils of the night and what they represent regarding the four ages of the world:

the child nurses at his mother's breast, which shows that, in the fourth age, all of us, by taste and natural reason, sensitive to the human taste, humble and tiny like children, will pull our substance from Jesus through the substance of our nourishment hidden within the Mother of the World.⁸²

Jesus possessed the female quality of passivity since he is the second person of the Trinity. Once again, Postel seems to display in his writing many of the characteristics of late medieval spirituality, as evidenced in paintings, such as those of Jesus feeding the world from his breast or the wound in his side.⁸³

Similarly, Postel attributed female qualities to God Himself, particularly in His capacity as Creator. In his *Candelabre de Moïse*, Postel painted this graphic picture:

⁸¹In this, Postel's language is consistent with medieval depictions, which sometimes portrayed Jesus as female himself since the incarnation of God in a body represented the union of the spirit (male) with the body (female). Caroline Bynum explores this in "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher et al. (New York: Urzone, 1989), Vol. I, 176.

⁸²*Candelabre de Moïse*, 402. "... l'enfant suce des têtées de sa mère, qui monstre que, en la quarte eage, nous tous par goust et raison naturelle au goust humain sensible humbles et petits comme enfants tireront nostre substance de Jésus par la substance de nostre nourrissement caché dedens la Mère du Monde."

⁸³Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 108.

El Sadai is the ninth name by which is signified the strong God of nourishment, or the breasts by whose breasts the ancient Fathers understood the sweet continuity of the nourishment of the divine Word, which ... will be given from father to son through the breasts of the Church.⁸⁴

In addition to extensive maternal imagery, Postel's writings also reveal a preoccupation with the idea of family. His fascination with the subject was linked to ideas of primogeniture and inheritance, which have already been noted. Postel's relationship with Joanna was always described in familial terms. The metaphor was also used in many other ways and pervades his writing. For example, he described the familial relationship of the three western religions. The Muslims, descendants of Ishmael, were bastard sons of Abraham. He considered Arab language and law to be a bastard derivation of Hebrew.⁸⁵ The analogy of family was also used to describe the relationship between the Pope and the King as being similar to the husband and the wife.⁸⁶

Postel also described the relationship between God and humanity in familial terms. Postel used the model of the parents governing their child and teaching it in order to explain how truth is communicated from God, as well as to show the necessity of obedience to authority: "It is thus certain that the

⁸⁴*Candelabre de Moïse*, 369. "El Sadai est le nom neufiesme par lequel est signifié le très fort Dieu du nourissement, ou des mamelles par lesquelles mamelles les ancien Pères ont entendu la très douce continuité du nourissement du divin Verbe, lequel ... sera donné de père en fils par les mammelles de l'Eglise ..."

⁸⁵"De la consequence et futurs effectz," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.15v.

⁸⁶"Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.130v.

simple law of primogeniture, or the right of paternal benediction is that which reveals to us the first authority."⁸⁷ He used the same metaphor of God as Father to argue that humans ought to strive for goodness, in the same way that a son works to become like his father.⁸⁸ This is actually one of comparatively few references to God's maleness. The husband-wife metaphor was also used. Within the family, the mother was the one who played the intermediary role; the mother was between the father and the children.⁸⁹

There is some insight into Postel's psychological state and how his system filled his psychological needs in his identification with the loneliness of Adam before Eve was created, and with the possibility that Jesus might be alone in heaven; Postel argued that Jesus needed a companion, "an assistant who is like him."⁹⁰ He believed that God had created the world:

... so that everyone would be conserved and maintained in the greatest union with him like in a perfect family, which is usually between the father of the family and his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, friends and brothers, he wanted him who is the Father of all families to give the the promise that they would all be united with the Divine.⁹¹

⁸⁷*La loi salique*, Chapter IV. "Il est donc tout certain que le droict de primogeniture simple, ou le droict de paternelle benediction est celuy qui nous monstre la premiere auctorite."

⁸⁸*La doctrine du siècle doré*, 93.

⁸⁹*Le thrésor des prophéties*, 147.

⁹⁰*L'histoire memorable*, fol.86v. "... une ayde semblable a luy."

⁹¹*Clef des choses cachées*, 51. "... afin que tous soient conservés et maintenus dans la plus grande union en lui comme dans une famille parfaite, ce qui a coutume d'être entre le Père de famille et ses fils, petits-fils, arrière-

In his mind, the essence of the human condition was that of isolation. This was in fact part of God's design. Salvation entailed the restoration of a familial relationship with God.

It is clear that cosmic relationships were the foundation of Postel's theology. In order to fulfill their roles, beings had to possess those qualities that were suited to their roles. It is therefore relevant to examine how, in Postel's mind, both Mary and Joanna did so. Postel defined Mary's greatest qualities as being mercy, forgiveness and humility. He argued that she had been placed in charge of the care of the world by her own son and demonstrated those maternal qualities needed to care for it.⁹² Mary worried about the salvation of her children and worked to turn them towards their initial innocence;

because she gives herself to everyone with free will restored in all things without having any other sentiments than those any Father or Mother would have for a very bad child who never wanted to love nor fear his parents nor God nor the Church nor the world.⁹³

It was because of her concern for her children that Mary's importance surpassed even that of Jesus. For Postel, Mary represented the best of the

petits-fils, amis et frères, il a voulu lui qui est le Père de toutes les familles, leur léguer la promesse qu'il [sic] seraient tous unis avec la Divinité."

⁹²"Du souverain effect," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.62.

⁹³Ibid., fol.66. "... car elle se donne a toutz avec le liberal arbitre en toutz Restitué sans en havoir aultre sentiment quavroit quelquonque Pere ou Mere a un tresmaulvais enfant qui jamais nha voulu Aymer ne craindre Pere ne Mere ne Dieu ne l'Eglise ne le monde."

qualities that all women share. Postel believed that virtuous women could be reformers and influence men. Some role models were biblical women such as Judith, Esther and Mary Magdalene; others were saints like Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Alexandra.⁹⁴

Because of her own role in the divine plan, Joanna possessed the requisite qualities. Joanna, like Jesus, her husband, lived her life in a spirit of "Pauvreté, Douleur et Mespris."⁹⁵ Joanna's mercy and ability to forgive was also one of her main characteristics in Postel's mind.⁹⁶ Postel contrasted his own personality with hers; he stated that he tended to be governed by a spirit of rigour, while Joanna's personality was characterized by mercy.⁹⁷ Through exposure to her, he acquired some of her attitude. Postel stated that Joanna taught him the value of mercy and forgiveness. In his words, this was a process whereby God removes "the black part" of the heart.⁹⁸

⁹⁴"Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.133.

⁹⁵*Les très merueilleuses victoires*, 43.

⁹⁶"Apologie de G.P.," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.12v.

⁹⁷Cited by Secret in "Guillaume Postel en la place de Realte," 65. "Hac de re mihi contigit ut prior meus spiritus totus esset in rigore, medius partim in rigore partim in misericordia. Ultimus autem secundum matrem nostram Johannam totus ferme in misericordia est, praeter crucem poenitentiae voluntariae et exercitii."

⁹⁸Ibid., 64-5. In this discussion, Postel begins to develop a psychology of religion. He associates the temperaments of the prophets and the sort of religious message that they expressed. For example, those with a bilious temperament express the judgement of God; others with a forgiving spirit preach mercy.

Postel valued femaleness because for him it personified the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice, which were the essence of the Christian message. Postel considered women to be superior to men in moral terms because of their greater capacity for love and emotional expression.⁹⁹ This is evident in his work on Salic law, in which he argued that in the same way that the King listens to the spiritual guidance of the Pope, as the body listens to the soul or the wife to the husband, so too must others relinquish their self-love:

Because it is necessary that the Mother deprives herself of her will in order to allow her husband to rule, it is also necessary that we relinquish our own wills and through sovereign victory ... we consecrate ourselves to our king and sovereign lord for the love of Christ, our maternal and royal mediator and our paternal or sacerdotal mediator united in God.¹⁰⁰

It is clear that Postel's mystical theology revolved around the need for a mediator to bridge the gap between God and humanity. The existential human condition was one of loneliness, a condition created so that people would strive toward the end for which they had been made, namely, union with God. The means by which this would come about was through the female, the embodiment of the divine quality of mercy. The female represented the material world in which humans lived, but, through her virginity, was able to

⁹⁹*Les très merueilleuses victoires*, 14-15.

¹⁰⁰"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.20v. "Car estant ainsi quil fault que la Mere se prive de sa volonte pour au lieu dicelle faire regner celle de son mari, il fault que nous privons de notre propre volonte et par victoire souveraine ... nous consacrions a nostre Roy et prestre souverain pour lamour de Iesus Christ notre Maternel ou Royal et notre Paternel ou Sacerdotal mediateur uny a Dieu."

rise up to the level of the spirit. It was this dynamic of upward movement that was the essence of salvation. The female, because she was lower on the hierarchy, would be able to bring it about.

In order to grasp the significance of Postel's views, it is worthwhile to examine the context in which they were developed. This chapter will conclude with a brief examination of Postel's detractors and his supporters. Protestants were reacting to exactly the sort of religious expression which Postel professed. Emphasis for Luther and Calvin was on a transcendent God. The use of female imagery for God in the writings of Luther and Calvin is minimal.¹⁰¹ Intercessors, whether Mary, the saints or the parish priest were shunned.

It has already been noted that Postel's translation of the *Protevangelion* evoked a strong reaction from Henri Estienne. Estienne incorporated his attack on Postel into a broader denunciation of mariolatry. He mentioned ridiculous legends about Mary that were being preached in the pulpit, legends that are not in the least biblical, for example, that Mary herself crucified Jesus out of love for the human race.¹⁰² In 1556, the Reformed theologian Pierre Viret wrote *Du Vray usage de la salutation faite par l'ange a la vierge Marie*,

¹⁰¹Jane Dempsey Douglass, "Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language for God: God as Enemy and God as Mother," *Archive for Reformation History*, 77 (1986), 136-8.

¹⁰²Estienne, *L'introduction au traité de la conformité des merveilles anciennes avec les modernes*, 402.

an attack on the worship of Mary and particularly on the use of the Rosary.¹⁰³ Viret condemned women in particular for its use, which suggests that the issue was not merely a religious one, but also a social one. He criticized women because they wanted to increase the number of saints' days and flaunted their rosaries as though they were jewelry. He argued that Mary herself did not want to be worshipped, but humbled herself before her son. Postel considered Viret one of his chief enemies and Postel suspected that Viret may have been using the pseudonym, Matthieu d'Antoine, in order to attack him.¹⁰⁴

On the other end of the spectrum, Postel's followers were noted for their devotion to Mary. In his study of Postel's disciples, many of whom came from Normandy, Maillard shows that one of the recurring themes is that of devotion to Mary.¹⁰⁵ Secret has similarly found that veneration of the Virgin was particularly strong in Normandy.¹⁰⁶ One of Postel's students was Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie.¹⁰⁷ In his study on Postel's influence on Le Fèvre, Secret

¹⁰³Pierre Viret, *Du vray usage de la salutation faite par l'ange a la vierge Marie, et de la source des chapelets, et de la maniere de prier par conte, et de l'abus qui y est: et du vray moyen par lequel la vierge Marie peut estre honorée ou deshonorée* (n.p.: Jean Gerard, 1556).

¹⁰⁴"Apologie de Guillaume Postel aux calumnies d'un qui se dict Docteur en loix nomme Matthieu d'Antoine," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.2.

¹⁰⁵Jean-François Maillard, "Postel et ses disciples normands," in *Guillaume Postel. Actes du colloque*, 85.

¹⁰⁶Secret, *L'ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie*, 16.

¹⁰⁷Postel mentioned Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie in letters to Masius and to Zwinger, written in 1572. See Secret, "Notes sur Guillaume Postel," *BHR*, 26 (1964), 134. See also Dudley Wilson, "The Quadrivium in the Scientific Poetry

discovered that, among Le Fèvre's borrowings from Postel, were his mystical language regarding the old and new Adam and the Virgin.¹⁰⁸ Secret concludes that while Le Fèvre did not endorse Postel's belief in the Venetian Virgin, his writings on the Virgin Mary reveal Postel's influence, especially in his *Hymnes ecclesiastiques*, published in 1578.¹⁰⁹

An examination of this work reveals that Le Fèvre considered emphasis on Mary to be the most effective way to entice people to return to Catholic orthodoxy. Most of the hymns in this compilation are from ancient sources, but a few are by Le Fèvre himself. In one he calls Mary the window to God.¹¹⁰ He also refers to her holy milk and to her restoring what Eve had robbed. One interesting aspect of many of his poems is their extreme physicality. Mary is often portrayed as lactating. The primacy of Mary in Le Fèvre's thought is also apparent in the introduction to his translation of Ficino's *Discours de l'honneste amour*.¹¹¹

of Guy Lefèvre de la Boderie" in *French Renaissance Studies 1540-70*, ed. Peter Sharratt (Edinburgh: University Press, 1976), 95-108.

¹⁰⁸Secret, *L'ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de La Boderie*, 41.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 108.

¹¹⁰Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, *Hymnes ecclesiastiques selon le cours de l'annee, avec autres cantiques spirituelz* (Paris: Robert le Mangnier, 1582), fol.90v.

¹¹¹Marsilio Ficino, *Discours de l'honneste amour sur le banquet de Platon*, trans. Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie (Paris: Jean Macé, 1578), preface.

Another of Postel's disciples was Vincent Cossard.¹¹² Cossard translated Postel's *Liber de causi* into French.¹¹³ In Postel's manuscripts there is a poem signed by Cossard himself on the subject of the Immaculate Conception, "Chant Royal sur la pure et tres sainte conception de la Vierge."¹¹⁴ In this poem, written in a combination of French and Latin, he uses the refrain "La mere Idée en sa flamme vivante." The flame is said to be the eternal flame kept in Rome by Vesta, the hearth goddess, until the arrival of Christ. Cossard describes the flame as present before the creation of the world when all was chaos.¹¹⁵ This Idea was coeternal with God.¹¹⁶ Much of Cossard's terminology reflects that of Postel. Whether Postel was a direct influence on his followers, or whether he attracted people to him who thought as he did, is difficult to ascertain. However, the fact that the veneration of Mary is a strong component of his followers' beliefs suggests that it played a central role in Postel's message as well.

In Postel's emphasis on Mary, his Catholicity is obvious. What it reveals was how very neatly Postel was able to fit his unorthodox theology regarding

¹¹²Secret, *L'ésothérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie*, 16.

¹¹³"Livre de causes," BN.ms.f.fr.928, fols.1-25v.

¹¹⁴BN.ms.f.fr. 928, fols. 213-4.

¹¹⁵Ibid., fol.214. "Ut Ignis ab aeterno in mente divina, cum flamma et virtute/Ita B. Virgo et mater: Uter non est agens sine patiente,/Sub eadem et Virgo et mater quae loco est totius maternitatis/mundi, divinitas vero paternitatis."

¹¹⁶Ibid., fol.213.

Joanna into a Catholic framework. For Postel, the Catholic Church was the vehicle through which the restoration would come about. Part of what he had been instructed to do by Joanna was to say a mass for the whole world.¹¹⁷ The identification of the Virgin Mary with the Mother of the World in Kabbalah validated the Catholic perspective.

Postel's veneration of the Virgin and faith in Joanna may be reflective of a female spirituality in which Joanna herself participated. What is certain is that it appealed to his own personal psychological needs for a significant female figure, but one devoid of erotic associations. This helps to explain both his descriptions of Joanna and of Mary. The fact that for Postel, both Joanna and Mary shared the same characteristics suggests that they appealed to his own psychological needs. In his writing, Joanna is an individual, but one who possesses the same qualities as Mary.

What can be ascertained with more certainty than Joanna's spirituality is that Postel's beliefs were characteristically masculine, in the sense that in his writing the role of the female is archetypal rather than personal and the role of the female is based on her inferiority to the male. Postel had a sense of those qualities necessary for a female to be divine: virginity and maternity. These allowed a woman to be grounded in the earth but to be able to reach up to the divine realms at the same time. Moreover, the primary personal quality possessed by both Mary and Joanna was a sense of humility and lowliness.

¹¹⁷"Les retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.fr.2115, fol.106.

This was consistent with the inferior status of the female, which Postel maintained and which will be explored in more depth in the following chapter.

Chapter Six

POSTEL'S NOTION OF BODY AND SOUL

Jean-Noël Vuarnet argues that Christianity, with its central doctrine being that of God's incarnation in a human body, places greater emphasis on the physical body than do other religions. The body becomes a metaphor for the spirit, a metaphor which must be decoded in order to understand its spiritual meaning.¹ The principle of the incarnation led to a contradictory position on the body and a rather paradoxical understanding of the relationship between the spirit and the body.² It has alternately been translated into an asceticism based on the hatred of the body, where the body is seen as a prison for the spirit, or a mysticism which transforms the body and the consequences of having a body, such as physical desire, into something divine.

Postel's view of the relationship between the body and the soul includes elements of both these tendencies, the mystical and the ascetic. In this, he seems to have been influenced by both Jewish and Christian thought. Therefore, in order to analyze Postel's views of gender a comparison with

¹Jean Noël Vuarnet, "Les phénomènes physiques du mysticisme et leur représentation," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 3/4 (1987), 123.

²Alain Boureau, "The Sacrality of One's Own Body in the Middle Ages," in *Corps mystique, corps sacré: Textual Transfigurations of the Body from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 7.

Jewish Kabbalah is helpful. It will then be possible to examine how his view diverged from that of Jewish mystical thought; in other words, to see how Postel adapted the Jewish tradition to Christianity, to see what he borrowed, what he discarded and what he modified. What becomes apparent is that while he used many of the images from Jewish Kabbalah, ultimately his notions of gender relations remained within the scope of the Christian mystical tradition, with certain ascetic elements.

A study of the body-spirit problem has important implications for gender history, because throughout much of the Western philosophical tradition, women have been associated with the body and men with the spirit, from the Greeks onward. According to the French feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray, it is the separation of the body from the soul in western thought that created the tension between male and female.³ This was translated both into an emphasis on virginity and the focus on the female as the representative of the material world.

Views of sexuality in Judaism in general have been more positive than in the Christian tradition. Charles Mopsik argues that there is a consistent view of the relation of the body and the soul throughout the history of Judaism.⁴ Beginning with the book of Genesis, procreation is equated with

³Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 122.

⁴Charles Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah," in *Fragments for a History of the*

God's creation of humanity. Sexuality was not considered an evil component of humanness, as has been the case in Christian thought. This contrast is apparent in the attitudes toward marriage in the respective religions. Judaism has always emphasized the importance of marriage; it never developed a celibate monastic tradition as did Christianity.

The Jewish emphasis on union and marriage is nowhere more prevalent than in the kabbalistic writings, particularly in the *Zohar*, the largest of the kabbalistic works and the most developed in terms of the discussion of the Shekhinah. The *Zohar* is the first Jewish work to use explicitly sexual and familial imagery to describe the relationship of God to the world.⁵ The imagery surrounding the Shekhinah is overtly sexual; she is called the bride of God and the bride of Israel.⁶ One of the leading historians of Kabbalah, Elliot Wolfson, argues that the sexual elements in Kabbalah may have been a conscious anti-Christian polemic directed at Christian monastic celibacy.⁷ The sexual imagery of Kabbalah was a conscious response to the sexually barren Christian myth regarding a celibate male born of a virgin.⁸

Human Body, Vol. I, 48-73.

⁵Joseph Dan, "Introduction," in *The Early Kabbalah*, ed. Joseph Dan, trans. Ronald C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 29.

⁶*Zohar, the Book of Enlightenment*, trans. Daniel Matt, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 162.

⁷Wolfson, "The Tree that is All," 59-60, 76.

⁸Wolfson, "Woman - The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah," 189.

Kabbalah develops its notions of marriage by using the platonic myth of primordial androgyny, the belief that humans were created as paired beings that were physically attached. The myth of the androgyne is found in Plato's *Symposium*; it states that when humans were first created, they were paired, that is, with two bodies and eight limbs. A version of this story is found in the Talmud which puts it in the context of the Genesis creation myth.⁹ The talmudic interpretation is based on the verse "God created man in his own image, ... male and female he created them."¹⁰ It states that Adam was created both male and female and was only divided later, after God recognized that humans would not reproduce if they were complete in themselves. In the *Zohar*, this story is seen as a metaphor for the soul; it is said that the human soul is united in heaven, but, because of human sinfulness, it is divided on earth into male and female halves; therefore, in order to develop fully, one must find one's "soul-mate."¹¹

This metaphor serves to explain procreation and the placement of the soul within the body. In Kabbalah, the body is considered a home for the soul, and human intercourse is the model for the relation of human souls created by a bisexual divinity. The *Zohar* states that it is through entrance into a human

⁹Maryanne Cline Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man - Is Woman Included?" *Harvard Theological Review*, 72 (1979), 184.

¹⁰Genesis 1:27.

¹¹*Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol.III, 1355-6.

body that the soul is given the opportunity to live in such a way that it will attain a higher level of spiritual understanding.¹²

Although it addresses primarily spiritual issues, the *Zohar* draws close parallels between the structure of the spiritual world and that of the physical world; it sees a correspondence between the gendered soul and human relations between the sexes. Marriage is defined as the union of two souls and the sexual act between them mirrors the divine intercourse between God and the Shekhinah.¹³ It is written that the Shekhinah resides with a man who has a wife, but a single man does not receive the Shekhinah.¹⁴ One's marriage partner is ordained in heaven and one must live a holy life in order to find one's soul-mate; if a man is evil, his wife, who had been designated in heaven, will be given to another. Unhappy marriages result when, because of sin, people are not matched with their soul-mate.

The *Zohar* also explains why some marriages result in children and others not. Intercourse should focus on the Shekhinah, on procreation as the act of bringing God into the world.¹⁵ Intercourse undertaken with an "impure mind" calls down Lilith, the Shekhinah's evil counterpart. Lilith's intervention could lead to the conception of a bad child, one who would disgrace his or her

¹²*The Zohar*, ed. Matt, 66.

¹³*Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. III, 1357.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 1394.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1382.

parents.¹⁶ Those who have intercourse only with the animal soul are in danger of this, but if one focusses on heaven, the children conceived will be good. The *Zohar* has a great deal to say on conjugal life at a practical level. It is prescriptive on more than the spiritual level, but also provides social guidelines as to what constitutes a proper marriage and proper sexual relations.

A useful point of comparison is that of Kabbalah to gnosticism, since both are founded on the concept of divine androgyny and dualistic views of the universe. In Kabbalah, the birth of a human is considered the opportunity for a soul from heaven to actualize itself in a physical body. In gnostic thought, the body is seen as hindering the soul. It is sometimes considered that Christian asceticism had its origins in gnosticism, in this concept that the soul must try and escape the physical world.¹⁷ In her comparison between the *Sefer ha-Bahir* with certain Cathar texts, Shulamith Shahar has found that, while there were parallel stories, the extreme dualism of Catharism led to a notion that matter was necessarily evil, that women, as the embodiment of the material world, were denigrated and that sex was forbidden.¹⁸ These notions are alien to Kabbalah. One could say that Kabbalah tried to regulate the libido rather than suppress or sublimate it, the more typically Christian

¹⁶Tbid., 1401.

¹⁷Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 63; Moshe Idel, "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 212.

¹⁸Shulamith Shahar, "Le Catharisme et le début de la cabale," *Annales: ESC*, 29 (1974), 1202.

response. In these two traditions, a dualistic view leads to opposing conclusions. Kabbalah tries to repair the relationship caused by tension between body and soul, while in gnosticism, the relationship is ruptured.

Postel's understanding combines elements of both views. This is important for understanding Postel's theology. While he denigrated the body for the sake of the spirit, he simultaneously designated the body and the material world as the place where salvation occurs. Postel borrowed many of the kabbalistic ideas regarding gender, such as the divine androgyny and universal duality between male and female. The issue that is raised, then, is whether Postel appropriated the kabbalistic view of sexuality as he did so many other components or whether he retained a more traditional Christian perspective.

The previous chapter has shown the extent to which Postel maintained the importance of virginity as a necessary attribute for both Mary and Joanna. In addition, Postel upheld the traditional Christian notion that the body was a hindrance to the soul.¹⁹ He argued that the sexual organs were the part of the body that was most vulnerable to being attacked by the devil. He stated that Satan:

... has over all parts of the human body chosen the generative member in man to exercise his displeasing and greatest wickedness against man, in order to lead him if he can to

¹⁹"Du souverain effect de la plus excellente Corone du monde," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.61v.

damnation through the door and by the means through which he could arrive at salvation and deification.²⁰

This statement is a corollary to that expressed earlier, that it was through the generative capacity of the female that salvation would be given to humanity. It is typical of Postel to develop such a paradigm, and develop it in such a way as to conclude by a traditional Christian notion. Postel is at his most fascinating when simultaneously orthodox and heterodox.

While he considered sexuality to be the point at which humans were most vulnerable to the devil, Postel did not reject the body as something evil in itself. He considered creation to be ultimately good and therefore the body to be good as well. The fact that God had created a material world proved that it was good. Postel argued that, had He wanted to do so, God could have chosen to create a spiritual world, but the fact that He created the physical world, peopled with humans rather than angels, suggested that it was necessary to His plans.²¹

In order to elucidate Postel's position on the relationship of the body to the soul and on the role of women in the salvific process, it is useful to compare his perspective on the creation myth with that of a Jewish Kabbalist

²⁰"Qu'est-ce que de l'image de Dieu à laquelle l'homme est créé, formé et fait?" in Secret, ed, *Postelliana*, 344. "... ha sur toutes les parties du corps human choisi les membres de generation en l'homme pour y exercer son envieuse et haultaine maschanceté contre l'homme, affin que de le conduire si il peut à damnation par la porte et moyen par où il devoit venir a salvation et deification."

²¹Backus, ed. *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese*, 26.

from the same period, Leon Ebreo (Judah Abarbanel). Ebreo wrote his *Dialoghi d'amore* in the first decade of the sixteenth century.²² It was designed as an introduction to Neoplatonism for Italian audiences.²³ In it, he introduced Kabbalistic ideas and combined them with pagan and Christian ones.²⁴ For Ebreo, the sexual act was a spiritual one and physical union increased spiritual love.²⁵ Union on earth mirrored union with God; Ebreo even described spiritual union as "copulation."²⁶ Sex was considered a restoration of cosmic harmony. Not all sex was permissible, of course, but within its bounds, it was a good thing.

Ebreo retold the myth of the androgyne in order to illustrate the need for marriage.²⁷ Creation occurred through God the Father, giving form to the

²²It was published in 1535 and translated into French in 1574. See Naomi Yavneh, "The Spiritual Eroticism of Leone's Hermaphrodite," in *Playing with Gender: A Renaissance Pursuit*, eds. Jean Brink, Maryanne C. Horowitz and Allison P. Coudert (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 85-6.

²³Ibid., 87.

²⁴Bernard McGinn, "Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, 22. Arthur Lesley considers Ebreo to have adapted Platonism to serve Judaism. Arthur M. Lesley, "The Place of the *Dialoghi d'amore* in Contemporaneous Jewish Thought," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, 184.

²⁵*Philosophie d'amour de M. Leon Hebreu*, trans. Denis Sauvage (Lyon: Benoist Rigaud, 1595), 108. "... avec la correspondance de l'union corporelle, l'amour spirituel se augmente, et se fait plus parfait."

²⁶Ibid., 101.

²⁷Ibid., 606.

material, maternal Chaos.²⁸ Adam was the name of the human creation that was both male and female, created in the image of God. God showed Adam, while he was still male and female joined together, how the animals propagated themselves. God then caused him to fall asleep and separated Eve from him.²⁹ From this point on, the male desired his female counterpart.

Postel also argued that Adam had originally contained both male and female.³⁰ However, while both Ebreo and Postel began with the idea of Adam as originally androgynous, their purposes and messages were very different. Ebreo argued in favour of marriage; Postel spoke only in mystical terms and said nothing about the physical state of marriage. Postel believed that his mystical immutation, when Joanna entered his body, had reenacted the unity of male and female which had existed in the person of Adam before Eve was created from his rib.³¹

There are two other significant differences between Postel's and Ebreo's renditions. First, Postel used the story to point out the different roles that were assigned to Adam and Eve; Adam was given the power of Reason, as was apparent in his assigned task of naming the animals, while Eve was given the ability to give birth:

²⁸Ibid., 520.

²⁹Ibid., 622.

³⁰"Livre des causes," BN.ms.f.fr.928, fol.11.

³¹Secret, *Kabbale et philosophie hermétique*, 61.

In one is the seed of heaven, in the other the seed of the earth. One is to engender the conformity of the heavens, always uniform, on earth, the other to engender and plant the earth in the heavens.³²

This emphasis is entirely absent in Ebreo's account. For Postel, it was the idea of engendering which formed the basis of his theology of Joanna as mother of the world. The idea that woman was responsible for procreation was foremost in Postel's theology.³³

Second, in Ebreo's description of the Fall, no particular blame was laid on Eve. In her analysis of the *Dialoghi d'amore*, Naomi Yavneh suggests that Ebreo's depiction of the Fall omitted the Christian typology which blamed Eve for sin and transformed Mary into a Second Eve who would restore salvation to the world through her Son.³⁴ Ebreo admitted that, after the separation of the androgyne, the woman succumbed first because she was the weaker member of the pair. However, it was not her femaleness that caused the Fall; rather it was the fact that the pair had been divided that led to sin. Ebreo referred to the sin of Adam and Eve equally.³⁵ His allegorical interpretation of the story absolved women as women and explained that the serpent was carnal appetite which betrayed the material, corporeal part of every human,

³²*Des merveilles du monde*, 48. "En l'un est la semence du Ciel, en l'autre la semence de la terre. L'un est pour engendrer la conformité du Ciel tousjours uniforme, en terre, l'autre est pour engendrer et planter la terre au Ciel."

³³*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 11.

³⁴Yavneh, "The Spiritual Eroticism," 95.

³⁵Ebreo, *Philosophie d'amour*, 617.

male or female, when it was separated from the intellect.³⁶ In general, Ebreo's message was that man needs woman to be complete and that spiritual union, brought about by physical union, was the goal for which humans were created.³⁷

Postel, on the other hand, emphasized, even exaggerated Eve's responsibility for the Fall. He placed great importance on Eve's sin, in order to emphasize God's ability to turn the triumph of Satan into His own victory and to show the central role of Woman in both the Fall and the Redemption:

It's imperative that in the same way that death from sin and the body came into the world much more through Eve and the maternity of the world than through Adam and paternity, restitution will also be made through an assistant similar to the New Adam, extracted from his total and communicable substance, without whose assistance it was not good that Adam be alone. Because in the same way that a single being cannot engender in the present life, a single being, through ordained power and in response to his countenance, will never engender the restored life.³⁸

For Ebreo, men could not be alone because spiritual union results from connection with women. For Postel, men could not be alone because restitution

³⁶Ibid., 618 and 624.

³⁷Yavneh, "The Spiritual Eroticism," 93.

³⁸*L'Histoire memorable des expeditions*, 86. "Car il fault que comme la mort du peché, et en apres, celle du corps est venue au monde beaucoup plus par Eve et par la maternité du monde, que par Adam et par la paternité, aussi la restitution soit faicte par une ayde semblable a l'Adam nouveau, extraicte de sa substance totale et communicable, sans laquelle ayde il n'est pas bon que Adam soit seul. Car comme ung seul ne peult engendrer a la vie presente, aussi ung seul par puissance ordonnée et respondente a sa figure ne engendrera a la vie restituée"

comes through Woman. Postel's typology, with its use of the Old Eve as prefiguring the New Eve, remained much more Christian than Jewish.

Moreover, Postel's use of the concept of androgyny served to justify his prophecy regarding Joanna. Matthieu d'Antoine, one of Postel's detractors, accused Postel of calling Jesus an androgyne, because Postel had spoken of his containing a female spirit. In his defense, Postel argued that he had never said Jesus was either a hermaphrodite nor an androgyne.³⁹ However, he noted that Jesus, although male, had to have contained the seeds of the female within him in order to have saved women. This was logically necessary because before Eve was taken from Adam's side, he had contained within himself both genders:

What I really said and what I mean to say is that Adam, under the sole appearance of a male, secretly and interiorly contained the material substance of the woman, to help her to engender when she would be separated from him.⁴⁰

In spite of his use of Jewish sources, his theology remained Christian in terms of his understanding of the incarnation. Postel used the Jewish terminology, but transformed it into a more orthodox Christian form in order to maintain Catholic views at a time when they were being challenged. His

³⁹"Apologie de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fols.1-36v; see also "Livre des retractions de Guillaume Postel," BN.ms.f.lat.3400, fol.11v.

⁴⁰"Apologies de G.P," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.3v. "Jay bien dict et entends dire qu'Adam soubz la seule apparence de l'homme masle secretement interieurement contenoit la materiele substance de la femme, pour luy estre ayde a engendrer lors quant elle seroit separee de dedens luy."

imagery becomes more comprehensible when it is analyzed in terms of its Catholic content. His emphasis on the corporal was in fact typical of late-medieval Christianity.

The importance of the incarnation in Christianity and in particular, Postel's Christianity was that it led to an apparently contradictory position on the body. On the one hand, the body was holy, as the incarnation itself proved; on the other, it was the seat of temptation and sin. Postel had to find his way through an essentially paradoxical position; he considered the spiritual world to be superior to the material world, but humans were located in the material world, the realm of the female. The inferiority of the female to the male was an essential component of his thought, this is also what empowered her. He explained the relationship in an unusual way. He argued that the material world was not a copy of the heavens, but a mirror image; therefore what was inferior on earth was superior in heaven.⁴¹ For example, in heaven silver is worth more than gold, on earth, gold is worth more than silver. Therefore, while women were inferior on earth, they were of greater importance in heaven. Such a view allowed him to defend his theology regarding the role of Joanna and of Catholic notions of the importance of Mary in Christian theology. The female was the link to the world and it was through her virginity and her superior moral behavior that she was able to transcend the world. This idea of the mirror image influenced his use of the body as

⁴¹"De la restitution de la vérité," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 163.

metaphor for the spiritual order. For Postel, the heart represented the woman and the head, man. However, he added that the heart is the vital organ which drives the body, even though it is under the head.⁴² The material world is a mirror reflection of heaven, where right becomes left.

This paradox explained how Christ could appear in Joan of Arc and Joanna, two women. For Postel, the relative weakness of women revealed the power of Christ; Jesus was born to a humble position because he "has kept the sovereign demonstration of his power to reveal it through the means of the lowest and most vile sex, which is the female."⁴³ Christ reveals Himself to be more powerful if He appears as a female than as a male.⁴⁴

Given Postel's emphasis on the material world, it is not surprising that he was fascinated by the idea of incarnation. Postel combined his understanding of the incarnation with his theology regarding Joanna. For Postel the principle of incarnation was real, not symbolic.⁴⁵ The distinction between Jesus and the rest of humanity was that Jesus came into a body by choice, not by necessity. The rest of humanity was brought to earth out of

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³"Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.131. "... ha garde la souveraine desmonstration de sa puissance pour la demonster par le moyen du plus bas et vil sexe qui est le feminin."

⁴⁴Ibid., fol.140v.

⁴⁵Ibid., fol.137 and "De la consequence," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.23v.

necessity. The fact that Jesus came by choice is apparent, Postel argued, because he was born from a virgin and not from two parents.⁴⁶

In the same way that Jesus, the New Adam, had been incarnated in a human body, so too did the New Eve have to come to earth in a bodily form:

Therefore it is necessary that as the Lamb, who is the New Adam, is a single, undivided person who is furnished with members constituting a whole, so also his said spouse is a solid feminine person, and not only a mystic or ecclesiastical one ...⁴⁷

Postel combined the Christian theology of the incarnation with the notion of metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls from one body to another. Postel was one of only a few Renaissance thinkers who maintained this belief.⁴⁸ At one point, Postel denied that he believed in transmigration of specific minds as did the Pythagoreans but he maintained that human souls were part of a vast composite: "I say therefore that all human life that ever was, is, and will be within whatever particular man is a part of the life of the only Mediator of life."⁴⁹ His source for such a belief was Kabbalah; in

⁴⁶*Le trésor de prophéties de l'univers*, 148.

⁴⁷*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 47. "Donc il fault que comme l'Aigneau, qui est Adam nouveau, est un seul ou personnel suppost ou indivis qui est fourny de ses membres constituant son tout, aussi sa dicte espouse soit une personne solide feminine, et non pas mistique ou ecclesiastique seulement ..."

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 63 ff. Secret provides a concise discussion of Postel's views of metempsychosis in *L'ésotérisme de Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie*, 81-2.

⁴⁹"Apologie de G.P.," BN.ms.f.lat.3402, fol.7. "Je dis donc que toute la vie humaine qui onc fut, est, et sera dedens quelquonque home particulier qui soit, est une partie de la vie du seul Mediateur de vie."

Kabbalah, the soul exists in heaven before it is united with a body on earth.⁵⁰ Postel cited as evidence for metempsychosis the idea from the New Testament that John the Baptist was Elijah reborn. He interpreted his own mystical experience as the simultaneous appearance of two souls united in the same body, the male surrounded by the female.

Postel argued that Jesus had been present in both Joan of Arc and in Joanna.⁵¹ In his discussions of Joan of Arc, he suggested that Christ had been embodied in her and that Christ's incarnation in people was not that of a ghost, but a real person.⁵² According to Postel the two sexes were united in Christ's various incarnations. In His first incarnation as the man Jesus, He contained the female inside Him. When Joan of Arc appeared, his royal nature was hidden and in Joanna, his natural reason was hidden; they all represented different components of Christ's activity on earth.⁵³ Since Jesus was a pre-existent spirit, coeternal with the Father, but had been incarnated in a body through his mother Mary, he acquired female traits.⁵⁴ Postel considered the concept of Christ's female nature to have been part of the hidden knowledge that Jesus did not reveal to his disciples. This was Postel's exegesis on the

⁵⁰The idea of the transmigration of souls in kabbalistic thought was first introduced in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*. Bouwsma, *Concordia mundi*, 43.

⁵¹*Le trésor des prophéties*, 263.

⁵²"Demonstration tresclaire," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.137.

⁵³"De la consequence," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.22.

⁵⁴*Clef des choses cachées*, 38. See also *La loy salike*, Chapter XVI.

statement of Jesus, "I have many more things to tell you, but you're not ready to understand them."⁵⁵ What he wanted to tell them, according to Postel, was that:

actually and in fact, Jesus Christ was in one flesh two bodies, so that in the same way as Adam and Eve and after all the parents of the world engendered by putting their seed into work to engender their children, so also was New Adam, united in body and flesh with the New Eve hidden inside his visible and masculine body, has regenerated us through these means of his double body with the two species of the sacrament of the altar.⁵⁶

This citation reveals what for Postel was the culmination of the union of body and soul, and a manifestation of incarnation, the sacrament of the Eucharist. For Postel, the Eucharist was a tangible event; Christ was bodily present in the bread and the wine. In a letter to Masius in 1563, Postel explained that Joanna revealed the mystery of the Eucharist to him along with the mysteries of the *Zohar*.⁵⁷ The Eucharist played a fundamental part in the whole cosmic system, because its dual nature reflected the union of two

⁵⁵"De la consequence," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.23v.

⁵⁶Ibid., fol.24. "reelement et de fait, Jesus Christ feust en une seule chair deux corps, pour et affin que tout ainsi come Adam et Eve et en apres toutz les parentz de ce monde ont engendre mettant leur semence en oeuvre pour engenderer leurs enfantz, ainsi l'Adam nouveau uny en un corps et chair avec l'Eve nouvelle cachee dedens son visible et masculin corps, nous aye par le moyen de son double corps en la double espece du sacrement de laultel toutz regeneres."

⁵⁷Chaufepié, *Dictionnaire historique*, Vol. III, 225.

disparate elements. Postel argued that it healed the sins of Adam and Eve and restored both the soul and the body.⁵⁸

Postel believed that souls were enlivened by the spirit of Christ through the Eucharist.⁵⁹ In one of his works, he even suggested that people were themselves deified when they shared in the Eucharist.⁶⁰ Postel stated that in the last of the four ages, the only offering that people would make to God would be that of the Eucharist.⁶¹ In his last published work, *Les premiers elements d'Euclide chrestien*, he argued that the purpose for which humans were created was to revere the Trinity, the cross and the true bread of life.⁶²

The clearest evidence of his emphasis on the importance of the Eucharist is his involvement in the publication of the miracle of Laon, which occurred in 1566. This event was purportedly the healing of a young girl, Nicole Obry, of demonic possession, through the use of the sacred host. The event was used as proof of the validity of the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist in the

⁵⁸Backus, *Le Miracle de Laon*, 38.

⁵⁹*Clef des choses cachées*, 50.

⁶⁰"De la restitution de la vérité demonstrative des temps courants," in Secret, ed., *Postelliana*, 173. "... tout y soit finalement, et par l'equivalence de vie unique c'est à dire et divine, et angelique et humaine, le tout avec le scavoir et memoire de l'home déifié et immortalisé, et par l'éternel boyre et menger du corps de la saincte equivalence, sera dedens nous ethernisé."

⁶¹"Restitutio rerum omnium," in Secret, ed., *Apologies and rétractions*, 137-8.

⁶²*Les premiers elements d'Euclide chrestien*, 15.

polemic against Protestantism.⁶³ Florimond de Raemond, one of Postel's supporters, reported that it was because he witnessed this event that he returned to the Catholic fold.⁶⁴ Postel's involvement was central. Under the pseudonym of Petrus Anusius Synesius, he wrote the first published account of the event.⁶⁵ Other major accounts were written by Jehan Boulaese, who has been considered by most Postel historians to have been a disciple of Postel.⁶⁶ Many of Postel's manuscripts exist in Boulaese's handwriting. Their association was close enough that Marion Kuntz has argued that Boulaese may

⁶³Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *L'imaginaire de la Renaissance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), 211.

⁶⁴De Raemond, *L'histoire de la naissance, progresz et decadence de l'heresie de ce siecle*, 202-4.

⁶⁵*De summopere consyderando miraculo victoriae corporis Christi* (Paris: Guillaume Guillard, 1566). The critical edition has been published by Irena Backus, *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese: De summopere (1566) et Le Miracle de Laon (1566): Edition critique, traduction et notes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1995).

⁶⁶*Le manuel de l'admirable victoire du corps de Dieu sur l'Esprit maling Beelzebub obtenue à Laon 1566* (par le commandement de noz Saints Peres les papes Pie V et Gregoire XIII) (Paris: Denys du Val, 1575) and *Le thresor et entiere histoire de la triomphante victoire du corps de Dieu sur l'esprit maling Beelzebub, obtenuë à Laon l'an mil cinq cens soixante six* (Paris: Nicolas Chesneau, 1578).

have been a pseudonym for Postel himself.⁶⁷ However, Irena Backus disagrees and has reaffirmed the notion that Boulaese was a disciple of Postel.⁶⁸

In any case, Postel is closely associated with the Miracle of Laon. For Postel, the event was significant for two reasons. First, the miracle proved the immediacy of the restitution of the New World and the efficacy of bread and wine as symbols of God's love for the world and provided tangible evidence of His presence in the world.⁶⁹ Second, since Postel believed that Mary had been present at the miracle of Laon, it confirmed his belief in her involvement as intercessor.⁷⁰

Other Catholic Kabbalists held similar views on the Eucharist. An interesting comparison can be made with Jean Thénau, who in his "Sainte et Trescrestienne Cabale," argued that the true Kabbalists were not those who listen to "obscure prophets" but those who read the Bible:

⁶⁷She claims that there is no record of Boulaese anywhere other than in his writings on the Miracle and nothing of him after 1579. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 150 ff. However, Kuntz does not seem to have been aware of a book published by Boulaese: Jehan Boulaese, *Remonstrance a nosseigneurs, messire Christofle de Thou ...* ("Audict College de Montagu, es mains seulement dudict Boulaese, 1575"). This book mentions Boulaese's employment at the Collège de Montague and seems to suggest quite clearly that the two men are separate individuals. Moreover, the fact that two distinct styles of handwriting exist in Postel's manuscripts leads one to conclude that they were written by two individuals.

⁶⁸Backus, ed., *Guillaume Postel and Jean Boulaese*, xxii.

⁶⁹Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel*, 145.

⁷⁰"La Raison et possibilite et verite de l'histoire de nostre dame de Lyesse," BN.ms.f.fr.2114, fol.35.

But through the organ and mouth of his son / As you believe my perfumed lily [Francis I] / And who also rightly perceive the sacraments / By which the good spirits taste the true delights / Which properly are only in the propitious saints / And even that of the Eucharist / Whose spiritual fire embraces and loves / In that soul in which love exists / Of which the clarity enlivens greatness.⁷¹

Thénaud refers to the use of the Eucharist as one path to spiritual enlightenment.⁷² Paracelsus also saw the Eucharist as spiritual food. Like the spiritualists, Paracelsus believed that true believers had direct access to God. He believed that in the Eucharist, the body of Christ is incorporated into the human body.⁷³

In assessing Postel's understanding of the relationship between body and soul, several themes have emerged. First, at the practical level, Postel upheld a traditional notion that the spiritual world was superior to the corporal one and that one must deny the needs of the body for the good of the soul. Postel's writing is rich in corporal metaphors, but he intended them to describe only the spiritual realm. When he actually dealt with issues related to the body, he revealed a more or less classic Christian asceticism. In spite of his reliance

⁷¹Blau, *The Christian Interpretation of the Cabala in the Renaissance*, 140-1. "Mais par lorgane et bouche de son filz/Comme tu croys mon tresodorant lys [i.e. Francis I]/Et qui aussi dignement percevront Les sacremens/par lesquels gousteront /Des bons espritz les soufve delices/Qui proprement ne sont que es saints propices/Et mesmement cil de leucaristie/Qui spirituel feu embrase ou amye/Dedans celle ame en qui est charite/Dont la clarte rend vive immensite."

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Alexandre Koyré, *Mystiques, spirituels, alchimistes du XVI^e siècle allemand* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 127; see also *Histoire du Christianisme*, Vol. VII, 826.

on Kabbalah, Postel's views of sexuality were much more Christian than they were Jewish. He argued for self-control and the denial of the body for the good of the spirit. He upheld the notions of celibacy and virginity as prime virtues.

However, Postel's asceticism was not derived from a belief that the body was evil and the spirit good. He considered material creation to have been a good work. His thought is an adaptation of Kabbalistic notions regarding the nature of the relationship of the spiritual and material worlds in order to justify his prophecy concerning Joanna and to maintain Catholic doctrine regarding the incarnation of the spirit in the body in the person of Christ and his real presence in the Eucharist, a doctrine of enormous controversy in the sixteenth century.

Chapter Seven

POSTEL AND THE *QUERELLE DES FEMMES*

In the sixteenth century, social issues were often expressed as religious ones. Therefore, it is obviously misleading to examine sixteenth-century religious writings without considering the social context in which they occurred. At the same time, however, discussions of gender in the sixteenth century cannot be neatly separated from the doctrinal disputes in which they were placed and which were often a major concern of their proponents.¹ The literature of the *querelle des femmes* cannot really be understood outside the context of Catholic/Protestant controversy. For example, Mary's role within Christianity was as emotionally-charged a question as the moral worth of women or the value of marriage. Furthermore, there were also general philosophical problems regarding the relationship of the soul to the body and the spiritual world to the material world which underlay the debate over women.

This chapter will examine Postel's place in the *querelle*, keeping in mind the Catholicity of his views as they have been demonstrated thus far. What becomes apparent is that, in comparison to other sixteenth-century

¹For example, John Thompson argues that Calvin's opinion that midwives should not be allowed to baptize infants cannot be understood without considering his views on the meaning of baptism as a sacrament. Thompson, *Calvin and the Daughters of Sarah*, 54-6.

participants in the *querelle*, and even other Catholic contributors, Postel's views stand out for their conservatism, specifically, their continuation of themes that were enunciated in the previous century by Italian Neoplatonists.

In general, historians of the *querelle des femmes* have tended to take a literary approach, a feminist one, or a combination of the two. Few historians have related it to the Reformation. This is due, in part to the complexity of both fields. However, there are also larger historiographical issues at stake. Merry Wiesner pointed out in 1987 that gender history of the early modern period had become ghettoized into its own field and had not been integrated into Reformation histories.² However, the relationship between the two fields should be quite obvious. One of the major points of debate in the *querelle* was the issue of marriage and Catholics and Protestants responded to it in different ways.

In order to understand the controversy over marriage, it is necessary to outline the social background. There were economic reasons why it became a topic of controversy in the early modern period. By the sixteenth century, Western Europe had finally recovered the population losses of the Black Death and this increase created economic hardship as land became increasingly scarce, prices soared, and famines occurred. Migration, poverty and vagrancy increased as the peasantry moved to the towns in search of work. This large-

²Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 18 (1987), 316.

scale social unrest was addressed by the upper classes, who were increasingly literate and urbanized, through attempts to reestablish some sort of order.

One component of this impetus for increased social control was the attempt, by both the State and the Church, to institutionalize marriage and stabilize society around the patriarchal family. As Joan Kelly, one of the first historians to examine women in the sixteenth century, succinctly states:

Poor laws, laws against vagrants, prostitutes, witches, even against religious orders in Protestant countries, herded people into households for their livelihood and placed unpropertied males - and all women - under the governance of the household 'master.'³

By the middle of the sixteenth century, the State had also begun to control and institutionalize marriage; regulations established by the Parliament of Paris in 1556 outlawed clandestine marriages.⁴ Sarah Hanley has analyzed the creation of inheritance laws at this time and concludes that marriage became a secular rather than a religious event.⁵ There were practical reasons given to support the institution of marriage; writing in the sixteenth century,

³Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400-1789," in *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 88.

⁴Sarah Hanley, "Engendering the State," *French Historical Studies*, 16 (1989), 11.

⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

Seigneur de Brantôme suggested that adultery was dangerous because it brought into question issues of inheritance.⁶

If one accepts this shift identified by social historians, an interesting question is raised. How did Catholic writers respond to the changing social climate and to the concurrent theological challenge posed by Protestants? They were faced with two possibilities: either to maintain their historic position or to try and modify it in order to adapt to social change. This chapter will examine these responses and place Postel within the spectrum of Catholic response. Two important areas of analysis will be considered in the context of gender analysis: attitudes toward marriage and celibacy and views on the Virgin Mary.

The classic Western Christian understanding of women was formulated by the church fathers, particularly Augustine and Jerome, who promoted a world view based on the Aristotelian equation of man with spirit and woman with body.⁷ The spirit was elevated over the body, and therefore man was superior to woman. Sex was sinful and sin was equated with death. Women were represented by Eve, the temptress, who introduced sin into the world. A woman could only be made perfect by overcoming her own nature, and

⁶Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, *Recueil des dames, poésies et tombeaux*, ed. Etienne Vaucheret (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), lxxxiii.

⁷For discussions of the church fathers and the development of the ideal of celibacy, two useful references are Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex* and John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975).

becoming like a man. This was achieved through perpetual virginity, the most exalted state a woman could aspire to.⁸ While Christianity rejected dualism in its most extreme form of gnosticism, where all matter was regarded as evil, it retained a dualistic attitude with regard to the relationship of the body and the soul.⁹ In so far as woman represented that which was physical, the body, she was something to be feared. This was the dominant world view of the Middle Ages, promoted by a church with an ostensibly celibate priesthood.

The late Middle Ages saw literature which denigrated marriage such as Jean de Meung's *Roman de la rose*, which describes marriage as a power struggle between man and wife.¹⁰ A fifteenth-century work, *Les quinze joyes de mariage*, took a satirical look at marriage.¹¹ Even those who were sympathetic toward woman, such as Jean Gerson, who was a supporter of Christine de Pisan in her quarrel with Jean de Meung, had a pessimistic view of marriage.

However, by the late fifteenth century and particularly in the sixteenth century, the traditional Christian view which promoted celibacy as the ideal

⁸A useful analysis is provided by Rosemary Radford Ruether in "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 150-83.

⁹Marina Warner considers gnosticism to have been the origin of Christian views of sexuality. Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, 48.

¹⁰*Histoire du féminisme français*, 46-7.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 62-3.

was being questioned. This was in part an anticlerical reaction to an ecclesiastical system which had by then become corrupt and swollen with overwhelming numbers of priests, clerics, monks and nuns. It was a shift towards a society of laymen; the head of the family came to replace the cleric as the model for a good life.¹²

The importance of this change in attitude is apparent in the books that were produced in sixteenth century France. The issue of marriage and of gender was a topic of great debate; hundreds of books were published in this century which addressed the question of whether women were morally superior or inferior to men.¹³ Responses varied from the most misogynistic tracts of the sort that fuelled the witch craze to others which venerated women as the pinnacle of creation.

Misogynistic tracts were produced in abundance, the most infamous being the *Malleus maleficarum* written by two Dominican friars, Kraemer and Sprenger, in 1486.¹⁴ The basic premise of this and other books - like André Tiraqueau's *De legibus connubialibus* (1513), Jean de Nevizan's *Sylvae nuptialis* (1521), or Gratien Dupont's *Controverses des sexes masculin et feminin* (1534) - was that women were ontologically evil. These books were

¹²*Le miroir des femmes, Vol.I: Moralistes et polémistes au XVI^e siècle*, 25.

¹³Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789," in *Women, History and Theory*, 71.

¹⁴A list of the most important works is found in *Histoire du féminisme français*, 81-3.

primarily litanies of the evils perpetrated in the world by women, with long lists of women in history who had seduced, deceived, or killed men. As with other forms of hate literature, the emotional content of these works is apparent to any careful reader.

These works sparked considerable response and were refuted by a number of authors. They were considered unjust from a humanistic point of view; for example, it was pointed out that if a man criticized women, he criticized his own mother.¹⁵ Many of the counter-arguments were designed to show that in fact, women were often more virtuous than men. The discussion on both sides was focussed on the issue of the morality of women. One of the major questions framed in the works of the *querelle* was whether women were trustworthy and whether marriage was a good thing. The question of the value of marriage was in fact at the centre of the debate.¹⁶ Those writers who defended women were doing so, not only for the sake of women, but in order to convince men that marriage was a valuable institution. They did so by denouncing stereotypical views that women were fickle and unstable and offering evidence that women were more often faithful in marriage than men. The idea of marriage as a Christian institution was being developed in many of the defences of women. A prime example is found in the writings of

¹⁵Symphorien Champier, *La nef des dames vertueuses* (Lyon: Jaques Arnollet, 1503), chapter ii.

¹⁶*Le miroir des femmes*, Vol. I, 9; *Histoire du féminisme français*, 83.

Erasmus on the question, for example, in his colloquy, "La Vierge méprisant le mariage," which was translated into French by Marot around 1535.¹⁷

It has been argued that the literature in defense of women was written to curry the favour of women at court. It is true that many of these books were dedicated to female patrons. Agrippa wrote his *De Nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* in 1509 in order to seek the protection of Marguerite of Austria.¹⁸ Postel dedicated his books to Marguerite de France and to Catherine de Medici. François de Billon also dedicated his work to Catherine de Medici.¹⁹ In his biography of Symphorien Champier, Brian Copenhaver argues that the *Nef des dames* was written by Champier to curry the favour of the noble ladies of the Bourbon family.²⁰ Juan Luis Vives dedicated his *Livre de l'institution de la femme chrestienne* to Catherine of Aragon and her daughter Mary.²¹ It is perhaps natural that books on women would be addressed to female patrons. The great extent of the literature in the *querelle des femmes* suggests that appeals to power were, however, not its only

¹⁷*Le miroir des femmes*, Vol. I, 59.

¹⁸*Histoire du féminisme français*, 91.

¹⁹François de Billon, *Le fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe féminin* (Paris: Ian d'Allyer, 1555).

²⁰Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier*, 49.

²¹Jehan Loys Vives, *Livre de l'institution de la femme chrestienne*, trans. Pierre de Changy, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1970), 15.

purpose. Moreover, the fact of female patronage does not preclude an analysis of the content of these works.

For Protestants, who rejected the spiritual necessity and practicality of a celibate life, finding a rational defense of marriage was not difficult. The stance of the Reformed Church was straightforward. For many practical reasons, marriage was something good. Theodore Beza stated that, although celibacy had certain practical advantages, in that there were fewer distractions in one's life, it was a gift from God given only to a few; thus, "whoever feels in himself the natural desire, so that he can be led to bad thoughts, is obliged to marry."²² He considered a vow of perpetual virginity to be "a diabolical doctrine."²³ His view was essentially pragmatic, as was Luther's. Luther considered lust to be an inevitable component of the fallen state of humanity; this being so, chastity is difficult. This is why Jesus had not advocated celibacy.²⁴ He pointed out that Paul supported the idea of celibacy because it freed people from the duties of having a partner, but that this did not make them more perfect than other people.²⁵ Luther argued that the New Testament

²²Theodore de Bèze, *Confession de la Foy Chrestienne* (n.p., 1559), 166. "... quiconque sent en soy tellement ce desir naturel, qu'il en peut estre tiré a mauvaises pensees, est obligé a se marier,..."

²³Ibid., 167.

²⁴"Sermon on the Estate of Marriage," (1519) in *Luther's Works*, Vol.XLIV: *The Christian in Society I*, ed and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 9.

²⁵"Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows" in *Luther's Works*, Vol.XLIV, 264.

made celibacy a personal decision; to enforce it rigorously was therefore a contradiction of the message of the gospel.²⁶ For Luther, the ideal woman was Martha, who stayed in the kitchen while her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to him; he belittled women's attempts, including those of his wife, to understand and learn Jesus' teachings.²⁷ Luther rejected the Catholic view that virginity was women's highest calling and replaced chastity with obedience; the women's role was that of procreation and subservience to a husband.

Many historians have raised the question of whether the Reformation was good or bad for women, and arguments have been made on both sides. Joan Kelly was the first to argue that Reformation theology actually reinforced patriarchy. A more positive assessment of Luther's views on women has been made by Jean Elshtain, who suggests that because Luther viewed sexuality in a more positive light than the Catholic clerics, he had a more accepting view of women as equals.²⁸ Other historians point out that Protestant imagery was more focussed on God the Father and lost some of the maternal imagery of late-medieval spirituality. Merry Wiesner accepts this distinction and argues

²⁶Ibid., 262.

²⁷Merry Wiesner, "Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys," in *Disciplines of Faith*, ed. Obelkevich, 300.

²⁸Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 87.

that Luther's theology is masculine in his emphasis on male traits of God.²⁹ Jane Douglass comes to a similar conclusion with regard to Calvin.³⁰

For Catholic participants in the *querelle*, it was much more difficult to address the issue of marriage and a more nuanced approach was needed than outright rejection of the value of celibacy. There were in fact a variety of responses. Some maintained the traditional view that celibacy was categorically superior to marriage, while in other writings, the reader can discern a struggle between the desire to uphold the traditional value of celibacy and an attempt to respond to the challenge posed by Protestant theology.

In contrast to the Protestant Reformation, little work has been done on the relationship of women to the Catholic Reformation. What does exist tends to relate to the institutional history of the Church. Only one extensive monograph is dedicated to this topic, by Elizabeth Rapley who has examined the rise of female religious orders of the early modern period.³¹ Rapley argues that the new active orders of uncloistered nuns, the *filles séculières* were not part of the Catholic Reformation, but in fact, were vigorously opposed by the Catholic Church.³² She points out that into the seventeenth century, when

²⁹Wiesner, "Luther and Women," 303.

³⁰Jane Dempsey Douglass, "Calvin's Use of Metaphorical Language for God: God as Enemy and God as Mother," *Archive for Reformation History*, 77 (1986), 137.

³¹Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

³²*Ibid.*, 23ff.

charitable orders such as the Sisters of Charity or the Sisters of the Visitation finally received official approval, those women who tried to bridge the gap between religious and lay were victims of public scorn.³³ She argues that the main concern of the Catholic Church with regard to women seems to have been the desire to keep them cloistered. Attempts by women to have an active role in the institutional church were discouraged and the Council of Trent reinforced the idea of the cloister for women. Wiesner reinforces Rapley's conclusions.³⁴

The desire of the Church to retain the status quo is evident in the writings of some Catholics of the period. There were those who considered the Protestant position scandalous. Florimond de Raemond represented the most traditional Catholic view. He attacked Luther for his marriage to Catherine von Bora.³⁵ He believed that Luther had deliberately married a nun to create a scandal: "It seems that Luther committed this villain incest on purpose, to choose a nun to defy Jesus Christ in his church."³⁶ De Raemond argued that marriage and the priesthood were incompatible:

And you, who want to reform the world, linked and attached to a woman, can you give yourself to the study of divine things, to

³³Ibid., 194.

³⁴Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, 199.

³⁵Florimond de Raemond, *L'antichrist* (Lyon: Jean Pillehotte, 1597), 564-9.

³⁶De Raemond, *L'histoire de la naissance, progres et decadence de l'heresie de ce siecle*, 299. "Il sembloit que Luther eust commis ce vilain inceste à dessein, et choisir une Nonnain pour braver Jesus-Christ en son Eglise."

the contemplation of the mysterious divine heights, the great and marvellous secrets of religion, can you offer to your God every day a body and a soul which is pure, free, unpolluted, cleaned of the trouble of this world, if you are married?³⁷

He chastized the Protestants for their perceived laxity. De Raemond also retained a rather misogynistic view of women; for example, he blamed the arrival of Protestantism into France on Marguerite de Navarre's frailty and gullibility as a woman.³⁸

There were others who continued to maintain the traditional view.³⁹ Juan Luis Vives, whose *Institution de la femme chrestienne* was translated into French in 1542, advocated celibacy over marriage.⁴⁰ Vives' first chapter is entitled, "De l'education et nourriture premiere de la vierge."⁴¹ For Vives, a virgin embodied Jesus in her unblemished body: "The virgin will consider with

³⁷De Raemond, *L'antichrist*, 571. "Et toy, qui veux reformer le monde, lié et attaché à une femme, vaqueras tu bien à l'estude des choses divins, à la contemplation des hauts divins mysteres, des grands et merveilleux secrets de la religion, pourras-tu offrir à ton Dieu tous les jours un corps et une ame pure, libre, impoluë, nette des troubles de ce monde, si tu es marié?"

³⁸De Raemond, *L'histoire de la naissance*, 847.

³⁹For example, see Guillaume Lindan, *Discours en forme de dialogue*, 38, 88, 98.

⁴⁰*Le miroir des femmes*, Vol. I, 71.

⁴¹Vives, *Livre de l'insitution de la femme chrestienne*, 22.

what care to protect her virginity which makes her similar to the church, companion of Mary, sister of the angels, mother of God, wife of Christ."⁴²

In sixteenth-century Catholicism, celibacy continued to be prized over marriage, and some maintained the traditional view, but there were others who began to modify their position. In the Marian sodalities, founded by the Jesuits in the sixteenth century to encourage lay piety, marriage was promoted.⁴³ There was growing opposition to the practice of committing children to religious orders if they were reluctant. Moreover, they clearly relegated women to the home rather than to business.

There were also Catholic marriage manuals printed to rival those of the Protestants.⁴⁴ Some Catholics who began cautiously endorsing marriage were Jean Bouchet, Jean de Marconville and François de Billon.⁴⁵ Jean de Marconville was a Catholic who sought the unity of the church, but objected to the use of force against the Protestants. He wrote a treatise warning that

⁴²Ibid., 46-7. "La vierge considera par quelle sollicitude doit garder sa virginité qui la faict semblable a l'Eglise compaignie de Marie, seur des anges, mere de Dieu, espouse de Jesus Christ."

⁴³Louis Chatellier, *The Europe of the Devout: The Catholic Reformation and the Formation of a New Society*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 143.

⁴⁴Wiesner, *Women and Gender*, 200.

⁴⁵Jean de Marconville, *De la bonte et mauvaistie des femmes* and *De l'heur et malheur de mariage* (Paris: Jean Dallier, 1564); Jean Bouchet, *Le Jugement poetic de l'honneur feminin et sejour des illustres claires & honnestes dames* (Paris: Jehan & Enguilbert de Marnef, 1538) and *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame* (Paris: Guillaume de Bossez, 1536); François de Billon, *Le Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe feminin* (Paris: Jan d'Allyer, 1555).

those who left the church merited hell.⁴⁶ He addressed the issue of marriage in his *De l'heur et malheur de mariage*, published in 1564. The stated premise of this work was that men and women were made to be married.⁴⁷ He advocated marriage as security "... against the disordered affections of the flesh and against the vices of incontinence and sensuality."⁴⁸

Jean Bouchet retained the Catholic conviction that celibacy was superior to marriage, although he was married and had a family. Bouchet's aim was to combat Lutheranism by providing moderate religious instruction in French.⁴⁹ He stated that his writings were designed "to distract women and girls from any longer reading the French translation of the Old or New Testament: which is dangerous to read ... and certain small tracts of some German heretics."⁵⁰ He developed what can be termed a moderate Catholic view

⁴⁶Jean de Marconville, *Chrestien advertissement aux refroidiz et escartez de l'ancienne Eglise Catholique, Romaine et Apostolique, contenant une exhortation salutaire pour reprendre le chemin qu'ils ont delaisé* (Paris: Jehan Dallier, 1571).

⁴⁷Jean de Marconville, *De l'heur et malheur de mariage*, (bound with *De la bonte et mauvestie des femmes*), fol.1. See also *De la bonte et mauvaistie des femmes*, fols.7-8.

⁴⁸Marconville, *De l'heur et malheur de mariage*, fol.15v. "... contre les desordonnées affections de la chair, et contre le vice d'incontinence et lubricité."

⁴⁹Jennifer Britnell, *Jean Bouchet* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), 222-3.

⁵⁰Bouchet, *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame*, epistre. "... pour destriare femmes et filles de plus lire la translation en francoys du vieil ou nouveau testament: qui est chose dangereuse a lire ... et certains petitz traictez daucuns alemens hereticques."

towards marriage. In his opening letter to *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame* he stated boldly that "Everything that is carnal is base."⁵¹ He gave advice, directed at his own daughters, on how young girls could retain their virginity. While he acknowledged that marriage was less pleasing to God than actual virginity, he defined faithfulness to one's husband as a type of virginity.⁵² He stated that if one could not be celibate, it would be better to marry than to become a priest with a concubine.⁵³ He also admitted that there were dangers associated with perpetual celibacy and excessive solitude and recognized that extreme denial could in fact contribute to passion and adultery.⁵⁴

François de Billon, secretary to Cardinal Jean du Bellay, also took a moderate view of marriage.⁵⁵ He suggested that marriage approaches chastity in worthiness.⁵⁶ He was supportive of marriage, because he considered women to be a civilizing force in society; he argued, for example, that they created nice homes. He stated that it was actually useful that women attracted men,

⁵¹Bouchet, *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame*, epistre (unnumbered). "Tout ce qui est chernel est vilain."

⁵²Bouchet, *Les triumphes de la noble et amoureuse dame*, xxi. See also *Le miroir des femmes*, Vol.I: 47-9.

⁵³Bouchet, *Le jugement poetic de l'honneur feminin*, non-paginated.

⁵⁴Jean Bouchet, *Angoysses et remèdes d'amours* (Poitiers: "au Pelican," [1536]), xlix.

⁵⁵*Histoire du féminisme français*, 102.

⁵⁶Billon, *Le fort inexpugnable*, fol.3.

because this led to procreation, which was in itself a good and necessary phenomenon.⁵⁷

These Catholic writers who began to defend women and marriage recognized that there existed a double standard of morality with regard to sexual behaviour. Several authors suggested that chastity should be considered a virtue for both sexes and not just for women.⁵⁸ One can see here an attempt to "civilize" men through moral improvement. Within a society that was undergoing major economic adjustments, writers were addressing the issue of how men ought to understand and treat women and live in the changing environment.

In order to endorse marriage, the attitude that women were universally inferior needed to be reworked, because it became difficult to explain why men were attracted to women or why they should desire to marry them. Because women were lower on the hierarchy than men, one had to explain the men's attraction to women, since according to their own logic men would not be attracted to something lower on the hierarchy than themselves. One solution had been worked out by the fifteenth-century Italian Neoplatonists.

⁵⁷Ibid., fol.6.

⁵⁸Bouchet, *Angoysses et remèdes d'amours*, xlv; Symphorien Champier, *La nef des dames vertueuses*, chapter 2 (unnumbered pages); see also Torquato Tasso, *Les morales de Tasso*, trans. I. Baudoin (Paris: Toussaint du Bray, 1632), 131.

Ficino revived Plato's definition of love as the admiration of beauty and the equation of beauty with goodness.⁵⁹ He stated that the final purpose of love was the admiration of beauty, perceived in the eye. Any other form of desire was a corruption and a distraction from the true goal of love.⁶⁰ The human senses were ordered hierarchically; sight was superior to touch. The Neoplatonists could then argue that women were the appropriate object of men's love because they were the more beautiful sex.⁶¹ Moreover, physical beauty was thought to reflect moral beauty. Attraction to women could therefore be explained; men were attracted to women's beauty because it reflected the beauty of the soul.⁶²

The Italian writer Agnolo Firenzuola was a popularizer of neoplatonic views for a general audience.⁶³ His *Delle bellezze delle donne* was published in 1548 and was his most celebrated work.⁶⁴ It is considered the definitive work

⁵⁹Marsilio Ficino, *Discours de l'honneste amour sur le banquet de Platon*, trans. Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie (Paris: Jean Macé, 1578), 18.

⁶⁰Ibid., 25.

⁶¹*Response a un curieux demandant pourquoi les hommes s'assubjectissent aux femmes*, 8.

⁶²Hierome de Montoux, *Commentaire de le conservation de santé et prolongation de vie*, 220.

⁶³Jacqueline Murray, "Agnolo Firenzuola on Female Sexuality and Women's Equality," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 22 (1991), 200 and 212.

⁶⁴It was translated into French in 1578. Angelo Firenzuola, *Discours de la beaute des dames* trans. I. Pallet Saintongeois (Paris: Abel l'Angelier, 1578).

on female beauty to come out of the Italian Renaissance.⁶⁵ He invoked the language of art and music in his discussions of the beauty of the female form.⁶⁶ One treatise compares the form of the female body to vases of different proportions and analyzes their aesthetic qualities.⁶⁷

The idealization of female beauty was characteristic of the writings of Italian Neoplatonists, many of whose works were translated into French in the sixteenth century and whose ideas were repeated in the works of French poets, philosophers and even physicians. Ficino's message was communicated in France through the writings of Symphorien Champier, whose *Nef des dames vertueuses* was the earliest French expression of Neoplatonism in the defense of women.⁶⁸ The distinction between spiritual and physical love is found in the love poetry of Petrarch, who was popular among the poets of the sixteenth century.⁶⁹ He distinguished spiritual love, which led to virtue, from physical

⁶⁵Tonia Caterina Riviello, *Agnolo Firenzuola: The Androgynous Vision* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1986), 66.

⁶⁶Firenzuola, *Discours de la beaute des dames*, 49. See also Piccolomini, *Dialogues et d'avis des demoiselles, pour les rendre vertueuses et bienheureuses en la vraye et parfaict amitié*, trans. François d'Amboise (Paris: Vincent Norment, 1581), 234.

⁶⁷Firenzuola, *Discours de la beaute des dames*, 49.

⁶⁸James B. Wadsworth, ed. *Le livre de vraye amour* by Symphorien Champier, (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1962), 13-14.

⁶⁹François Pétrarque [Francesco Petrarch], *La vertu et la grâce*, trans. André Ughetto and Christian Guilleau (Paris: Orphée/La Différence, 1990), 103.

love, which led to vice. Spiritual love was driven by a need to admire; the latter by a need to satisfy the appetite.

By the sixteenth century, there was some debate of the assumptions which formed the foundation of the neoplatonic views of love and marriage. For example, the *querelle* brought into question the Aristotelian definition of woman as a defective male. Aristotle was generally cited by misogynists in their attacks on women.⁷⁰ However, in other works, he was questioned. Castiglione's *Courtier* was probably the most important Renaissance book for discussing the relationship of the sexes among the nobility.⁷¹ In this work, the association of women with matter and men with form became a point of debate.⁷² The issue was also discussed later in the century, in the anonymous tract, *Response a un curieux demandant pourquoi les hommes s'assubjectissent aux femmes*.⁷³ Those who favoured women, like François de Billon, refuted the Aristotelian definition of a woman as a defective male and argued that while men and women had different bodies, their souls were the same.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Horowitz, "Aristotle and Woman," 188.

⁷¹Joan Kelly, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History and Theory*, 39.

⁷²Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1967), 221.

⁷³*Response a un curieux demandant pourquoi les hommes s'assubjectissent aux femmes* (Paris: Lucas Breyel, 1598), 3.

⁷⁴Billon, *Le fort inexpugnable*, fols.1v, 5.

Within this debate, Postel's position can now be examined. While some of his co-religionists were questioning the traditional framework, he retained the neoplatonic world view with regard to male/female relationships. What must be realized, however, is that he transformed it into an entirely unique and personal theology. Given the fact that Postel's purpose was unique and his prophecy so unusual, some historians have suggested that he had nothing in common with other writers of his period in terms of his ideas about women. Other historians place him among those who are the most favourable defenders of women, since he argued that through a woman God would return to earth. Both of these claims require modification.

He certainly borrowed the format of works in the *querelle des femmes* in his *Les très merueilleuses victoires des femmes du nouveau monde*. He couched his revelation in a conventional format to disguise its unconventional content. At first glance, the book appears to be one more contribution to the *querelle des femmes* on the side of those who were arguing that women were superior to men. A glance at the title of the book and chapter headings would certainly lead a prospective buyer to think so. Some of his chapter titles are "Some Admirable Facts of the Feminine Sex, "The Sovereign Blessings which have Come into the World by Women," and "Stories of Prudent and Knowledgeable Women."⁷⁵ These sound much like what is found in innumerable other works

⁷⁵"Des admirable excellences et faitz du sexe feminin," "Des souverain biens qui sont venuz au monde par les femmes," and "Histoires des prudentes et sçavantes femmes."

from this period, many of which were simply catalogues of stories of famous women.⁷⁶ However, Postel's discussion of knowledgeable women turns out to be an introduction to the person of Joanna. His reference to the New World (which also would have been intriguing to his French readers) turns out to be the western hemisphere which, because it is younger, inferior, and thus female, belongs to Joanna.⁷⁷

In spite of his unusual prophecy, Postel was recognized as participating in the *querelle* by at least one of his contemporaries. Jean de Marconville, who had heard him preach in Paris, cited him on several occasions.⁷⁸ He echoed Postel's sentiments in his work on women and marriage:

... to whom would God have distributed his graces if the animal body had not been first produced from the woman, in order to make it spiritual? And as it is not enough that the man and the woman exist, if they are not reduced into one individual that the total seed and substance of the male be surrounded by that of the female, so that the woman surrounds the man, and that the masculine nature is joined with the feminine. Because God (to expand his glory) shows himself through the least force, to

⁷⁶Many of the works in the *querelle* were derivative of earlier works (Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* and Christine de Pisan's *City of Women* are the prototypes) and are in fact tediously repetitious. The typical format was to cite examples from the past of women who were outstanding in some way; these may be any combination of female rulers (mythical, biblical and historical), pagan goddesses, muses, sibyls, and saints.

⁷⁷*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 50.

⁷⁸Marconville, *De la bonte et mauvaistie des femmes*, fol. 68.

manifest himself more excellent than through great force, and in this way wanted to confound the Satanic power.⁷⁹

For Marconville, this argument, quite clearly based on his knowledge of Postel, demonstrated the excellence of women. This became the starting point of his defense of women.⁸⁰ Through Marconville, Postel's spirituality was brought into the context of the *querelle des femmes*.

The underlying conservatism of Postel's position becomes apparent when compared to other Catholic writers who were debating the inferiority of women. Issues that were open to debate were whether men could be equated with form and women with matter, whether Eve was responsible for bringing sin into the world, and whether the souls of men and women were different.⁸¹ On all of these issues, there were writers who rejected the classic formulation and argued against it.

⁷⁹Ibid., fol.7v. "... à qui distibueroit Dieu ses graces si de la femme n'esoit premierement produit le corps animal pour le fair spirituel afin de les recevoir? Et comme ce n'est past assez que l'homme et la femme soient, s'ilz ne sont tellement reduicts en un individu que la totale semence et substance du masle soit environnée de celle de la femme, afin que la femme environ l'homme, et que la nature masculine se joigne avec la foeminine. Car Dieu par moindre force se monstre et se veult (pour accroistre sa gloire) manifester plus excellent, que par la plus grande force, et en ceste sorte a voulu confondre la puissance Sathanique."

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Several authors, like Heinrich Agrippa and Jean Bouchet, pointed out that, in terms of their souls, men and women were equal. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *De la superiorité des femmes*, trans. Bernard Dubourg (Paris: Dervy Livres, 1986), 34.

However, rather than rejecting these ideas, Postel used them as the foundation of his thought. His solution to the problem of the role of men and women was not to reformulate the question, but to turn it upside down. He too attempted some revision of the traditional framework, but in a different way from his contemporaries. Women's inferiority to men became the key to their importance in the cosmos. It was precisely because women represented matter that they were the means by which the material world would be restored. It was because Eve was responsible for sin that the New Eve would be responsible for salvation, in order to attain divine equilibrium. And it was because the souls of men and women were different, that women were capable of understanding some spiritual truths that men could not. One of the ways that Joanna convinced him she had spiritual knowledge was by the fact that she knew things he did not, even though she had no education. Because Postel believed that all things naturally tended to what is good and desired to rise up in the hierarchy to unite with God, he could argue that women's lower status gave them greater impetus to rise and in this way, they became more spiritual than men.⁸²

⁸²Emile Telle, *L'oeuvre de Marguerite d'Angoulême Reine de Navarre et la querelle des femmes* (Toulouse: Lion et fils, 1937), 67. This argument is also enunciated by Leon Ebreo in *Philosophie d'amour*, 330: "... le superior, aimant l'inferieur, desire supplier ce qui defaut de perfection, à l'inferieur, par sa superiorité: et en ceste maniere les spirituels aiment les corporels et materiels."

Postel's insistence on the inferiority of women allowed him to argue that women should not be held responsible as seductresses who tempt men into sin. The lower status of women absolved them of their sin and their tendency to rise worked in their favour, whereas for men, they could easily sink into sin because their position was the superior one. In this instance, his argument was similar to that of other writers. Postel stated:

But one should, in my certain judgement accuse men more, who have been so brutal and sinister from the great excellence that God bestowed on them ... considering they let themselves be attracted by the persuasion of said women, and must necessarily conclude that the said men, barely or not at all victorious over their disordered appetites have let themselves and still let themselves like poor beasts be mastered by the weaker sex.⁸³

There is a rather paradoxical attitude at work in Postel, as well as in others such as Bouchet and Marconville. On the one hand, women's inferiority meant that they were less responsible than men for their sins. On the other hand, in practice, they often behaved more modestly and chastely than men. Bouchet argued that women were generally more chaste than men, for two reasons: they were naturally more modest and they were colder than men in

⁸³*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 8-9. "Mais on debvroit à mon tres-certain jugement en beaucoup plus accuser les hommes qui ont esté si lourdautz et malusantz de la plus grande excellence que Dieu leur ha baillée ... que de se laisser attraire par les persuasions desdictes femmes, et fault necessairement conclure que lesdictz hommes, mal ou nullement victorieux de leurs desordonnez appetitz se sont laissés et se laissent comme pauvres bestes surmonter du moindre sexe, ..."

temperature.⁸⁴ Marconville said that women were morally superior to men and that it was men's fault if they were led into temptation by women.⁸⁵ However, they also still considered men to be more reasonable than women, and therefore, theoretically they were responsible for their sexual sins:

It's shameful for a man to say that he has been deceived by a woman and especially that he is not naturally of such a fragile condition and that he considers himself more prudent than the woman. And it is a greater shame to frequent that which he believes to be bad and dangerous for him.⁸⁶

Therefore, the tension between a view which maintained the inferiority of women beside their perceived moral superiority worked as a means of chastisement for men, particularly if it could be shown that often women held the moral high ground.

For Postel in particular, this paradox forms the core of this aspect of his theology. Postel combined the concept of women's inferiority with a recognition of the paradoxical message in the New Testament. He argued that the virtues which Jesus preached were more often found in women than in men. In this way, he defended women because he argued that since they were more humble they were ultimately more spiritual. Postel was still using the Aristotelian

⁸⁴Bouchet, *Le jugement poetic de l'honneur feminin et sejour des illustres claires et honnestes Dames*, unnumbered pages.

⁸⁵Marconville, *De la bonte et mauvaistie des femmes*, fol.7.

⁸⁶Bouchet, *Le jugement poetic de l'honneur feminin*, unnumbered pages. "Cest une honte a l'homme de dire quil a este deceu par une femme dautant quil nest naturellement de si fragile condicion et quil se dict plus prudent que la femme. Et plus grand honte de frequenter ce quil croit luy estre mauvais et dangereux."

paradigm, but, through reference to New Testament theology, reversing its meaning. Postel used the inferiority of women as a rhetorical device. It has already been shown how he contrasted Joanna with the Pope and used her to criticize the wealth and pomp of the Roman church.⁸⁷

Postel's use of woman as symbol and his awareness of the paradox involved confirms Caroline Bynum's conclusions about the different ways in which men and women use religious symbols. She suggests that while men idealize and symbolize women, the reverse rarely occurs.⁸⁸ The reason for this is that women themselves embodied the Christian virtues of humility, self-abnegation, service, suffering; men needed to symbolically "become women" before God. Religious men were aware of this paradox inherent in Christian spirituality.⁸⁹

However, it must be added that Postel's use of female terminology was not always complimentary and gender imagery also pervaded his thought in moments of anger. In this sense he participated in the use of female terminology as epithets of abuse, a practice common to all sides of the doctrinal disputes. For example, it was part of the discourse of the sixteenth century to speak of the Church as the "whore of Babylon," and Postel entered into this

⁸⁷*Les très merveilleuses victoires*, 63.

⁸⁸Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 281.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 279 and 287.

mindset.⁹⁰ He borrowed an image from Ezekiel 23, where Jerusalem and Samaria are described as two prostitutes who have defiled themselves by association with the Assyrians. Postel updated the metaphor by comparing it with Spanish attempts to negotiate with the Turks; he described the attempts of the Catholic Church to intervene as the "fornication of Rome with the princes and kings of the earth" and an alliance between Philip of Spain and the Ottoman Turks as behaviour worse than that of a prostitute, but as a:

... mother in terms of the life and union of the true and certain Catholic doctrine of the living child, but stolen by union with the bastard mass of worldly sensualists ...⁹¹

In the writings of Postel, then, there exists a consistently dichotomous view of the physical and the spiritual realms. Woman was holy only when she transcended the physical. In this sense, Postel's views were very much neoplatonic.

At the most vicious level, participants in the *querelle des femmes* were overtly misogynistic; however, at the most exalted, they were still misogynistic in the sense that women were not represented as people, but rather, as icons. Women do not appear as individuals with personalities.⁹² The woman could

⁹⁰Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 75: "In general, feminine epithets (next to scatology) were among the commonest forms of abuse."

⁹¹"Lettre de Postel au Baron de Senecey," in "Notes sur Guillaume Postel" *BHR*, 23 (1961), 542. "... mère quant à la vie et union de catholique doctrine du tout tres certaine de l'enfant qui est vif, mais desrobé par la bastarde masse et union des sensuels mondains ..."

⁹²Natalie Davis, Introduction to *Histoire des femmes en Occident*, Vol.III: *XVI^e - XVIII^e siècles*, 14.

hold two places in relation to a man; she could be either the object of his desire or at best, the object of his love. She had no being of her own independent of her relationship to man in the neoplatonic writings. The veneration of women as beautiful kept them silent and ensured that they would have no place in the political realm.⁹³

In their discussion of the various ways to categorize the *querelle* literature, Albistur and Armogathe reveal that the neoplatonic stream was an important component of the discussion, particularly between 1542 and 1560.⁹⁴ Castiglione represents the neoplatonic conception of love where women become merely objects for men and vehicles for their own spiritual ascent to divine love, through the admiration of beauty.

The neoplatonic stream of thought stressed spiritual over physical love; Ficino recognized that sex was necessary for procreation, but did not consider it to be a component of spiritual love.⁹⁵ In fact, love and desire were diametrically opposed. This separation of neoplatonic love as admiration or reverence from the passions is one of the key elements of neoplatonic writings on women. What one finds among the neoplatonic participants in the *querelle* literature is thus a certain ambivalence toward the virtues of celibacy. The main message of the Neoplatonists was that spiritual love was to be sought

⁹³Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 73-4.

⁹⁴*Histoire du féminisme français*, 80.

⁹⁵Marsilio Ficino, *Discours de l'honneste amour sur le banquet de Platon*, 232.

and physical love shunned as inferior and base. Love was the love of beauty in the abstract sense.⁹⁶ It was undefiled by carnal desires. This idea coalesced perfectly with the view of the churchmen that a virgin was pure and could become an instrument of God.⁹⁷

It is not surprising that Catholic participants in the *querelle*, who retained this tendency to spiritualize women, continued to emphasize Mary as the epitome of womanhood. In fact, several works conclude with the idea that Mary was to be praised above all. For example, the anonymous writer of the *Response a un curieux* states that men should serve women "because so many goods have come through this divine woman, this Queen of Angels and of men, full of grace, elevated above all creatures."⁹⁸ On the first page of de Billon's *Fort inexpugnable de l'honneur du sexe femenin* is a diagram of a fortress attacked by cannons; the flag flying is a picture of the virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus.⁹⁹ In his description of this image de Billon states that, in fact, he conceived of the book at first so that Mary's place at the head of the fortress

⁹⁶For example, see Symphorien Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 52.

⁹⁷In her analysis of Cardinal Cisneros' relations with women, Jodi Bilinkoff arrives at this portrayal of a Catholic towards holy women. Bilinkoff, "A Spanish Prophetess," 30-31.

⁹⁸*Response a un curieux*, 20. "... puis que tant de biens nous sont venus à l'occasion de cette Divine femme, ceste Royne des Anges et des hommes, pleine de toutes graces, eslevée par dessus toutes creatures."

⁹⁹Billon, *Le fort inexpugnable*, cover page.

would be maintained.¹⁰⁰ He argues that when women are vilified, so is Mary and "in honour of the Virgin, every woman is excused."¹⁰¹ Jean Bouchet also appeals to Mary as the epitome of womankind and portrays her as the defence lawyer who pleads for people before Jesus the judge.¹⁰²

Symphorien Champier concluded his work by portraying Mary as the one who incites people to follow a good moral path and to do good works, in order to praise her son, whom she lent to us on earth.¹⁰³ Wadsworth in his study of Champier, emphasizes the Catholicity of his position:

Champier in the end falls into a negative, gloomy atmosphere, fraught with original sin, from which there is no escape to the Idea of the Good or of Beauty, only orthodox hope in the intercession of the Virgin and her Son.¹⁰⁴

What is significant is the Catholicity of the tracts that defend women. They cite Mary as the epitome of womankind and even humankind.¹⁰⁵ They cite long

¹⁰⁰Ibid., fol.132. "... pour et a la gloire de son Nom, en especial, cete Place ayt été premièrement conçue en l'Esprit du Batisseur, que construite ainsi qu'on l'apperçoit."

¹⁰¹Ibid., fol.108. "En honneur de la Vierge toute Femme est excusable." See also fols.132 ff.

¹⁰²Bouchet, *Le jugement poetic de l'honneur feminin*, non-paginated.

¹⁰³Champier, *Le livre de vraye amour*, 70.

¹⁰⁴Wadsworth, ed. in *Le livre de vraye amour* by Champier, 34.

¹⁰⁵A useful anthology of texts was compiled in the sixteenth century by Ravisius Textor, *De memorabilibus et claris mulieribus: aliquot diversorum scriptorum opera* (Paris: Simonis Colinaci, 1521). Many of the works included are lists of good women, with Mary at the head of the list.

lists of the saints as proof of the holiness of women.¹⁰⁶ In short, the *querelle des femmes* was for some writers a way to defend Catholic doctrine regarding the place of Mary within Christianity. The argument within the *querelle* literature was fought over the iconographic role of women to a greater extent than it was a debate over the role of women in society.

The central issue that underlay Reformation controversy was the nature of the relationship between humans and God. The immanent God of the late medieval period had receded, and His intercessor, the Virgin Mary, with Him. Both Luther and Calvin concerned themselves with exalting the transcendent nature of God. The Catholics, like Postel, clung to Mary for support. Protestants focussed on God the Father. Neoplatonists were working on the same problem of trying to find the connection between the transcendent and the immanent.¹⁰⁷ For Postel, woman was the middle figure between God and man. So he saw God as ultimately transcendent as well. It is not unreasonable to suggest that perhaps Luther and Postel were dealing with the same type of emotional crisis which led to radically different theological solutions; Luther found comfort in the recognition of his own lowliness and unworthiness before God and the consequent strength of God's grace to

¹⁰⁶Champier, *La nef des dames vertueuses*, Part I.

¹⁰⁷Copenhaver, *Symphorien Champier and the Reception of the Occultist Tradition*, 177 ff.

overcome it. For Postel, God the Father was too remote to deal with, but God the Mother fulfilled his need for security.

It is difficult, coming from the perspective of the late twentieth century, to know how to assess a position such as Postel's, which is filled with paradox. While he praised women, the key to his theology was their inferiority to men. Moreover, he created a strict division between the sexes and spheres of power, as is apparent in his discussions of Salic Law. Constance Jordan points out the difficulty of the task of evaluating Renaissance literature on women.¹⁰⁸ Those treatises which were ostensibly favourable to women often undermine women's authority by insisting on their secondary status to men. Misogynistic texts may inadvertently empower women by their portrayal of women as headstrong and rebellious. In the same way, Postel's views do not allow for a superficial assessment.

Postel had a different mission from other participants in the *querelle*. Other writers provided rational arguments for the superiority of women. The anonymous author of the *Response a un curieux* praised women for many practical reasons: because they lift men up, because they do a lot of work, because men cause them to have a lot of pain in childbirth; because Mary brought Jesus into the world.¹⁰⁹ François de Billon provided a rational

¹⁰⁸Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁰⁹*Response a un curieux*, 13.

argument for why women were intellectually inferior to men; their lack of education was the most reasonable cause, in his mind.¹¹⁰ However, Postel's language was generally archetypal and allegorical.

Therefore, when such a comparison is undertaken between Postel and other participants in the *querelle des femmes*, it becomes apparent that Postel was not a defender of women in the same league as some of his contemporaries. Rather, he remained a fervent upholder of the traditional Christian position with roots in Aristotelian philosophy. He had more in common with late medieval notions than with his contemporaries in the Renaissance who were revising - or at least questioning - their views of women.

While Postel's purpose in discussing women was unique, he can be interpreted as a conservative participant in the *querelle des femmes*, alongside other Catholic, neoplatonic participants. He upheld the notions of womanhood that were represented in the Virgin Mary and the superiority of the spirit over the body. What he shared with other neoplatonic participants in the *querelle* was an intellectual attempt to spiritualize gender relations and so empty them of their physical and sexual content. He borrowed the neoplatonic concept of love as veneration and took it one step further, into the mystical realm. What others argued in philosophical language, Postel expressed in the language of the mystic and prophet.

¹¹⁰Billon, *Le fort inexpugnable*, fol.7v.

Chapter Eight

CONCLUSION

In order to evaluate the relevance of the ideas of Guillaume Postel to notions of womanhood in the sixteenth century, it is necessary to examine the social implications of his theology. This chapter will therefore examine recent or current theories regarding gender relations in the Reformation. Postel can best be understood in the context of an understanding of the Reformation as, at least in part, an instrument of social control. Postel's underlying objective was the stabilization of society around two strong institutions, the Church and the State. There is no question that Postel sought a stable society, and the means through which he thought this could be accomplished was in the religious realm. In this sense, it is necessary to recognize that his primary concern was religious before it was societal. Postel desired not only universal peace on earth but the union of each individual with God.

It is somewhat presumptuous to summarize Reformation thought in a few pages. Such a broad social and religious phenomenon, which expressed itself in many and varied ways simultaneously, does not lend itself to easy generalization. However, one lens through which to view the Reformation is that of gender. In this light, the Reformation can be seen to be, at least in part, an attempt to discard a form of spirituality which was primarily visual and emotional and to replace it with a religion that was based on the written

word, and that preferred the intellect to the emotions as the path to God. In the former, strong female imagery was sanctioned by the Church, and in the latter, it was either downplayed or overturned. In the Reformation project to rid the Church of its medieval accretions, what was lost was a form of Christianity that appealed to a certain collective emotional need for a Mother as intercessor between God and humanity. The Reformation can thus be seen as a period when the Christian faith was intellectualized.

This shift was driven by technological developments. The impact of the printing press on the medieval world and the development of a print culture have been examined by many historians.¹ Walter Ong was one of the first to examine the historical significance of the development of literacy and print in the sixteenth century as the evolution of human consciousness.² He argued

¹See, for example, Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London/New York: Methuen, 1981); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

²Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 105. Ong's conclusion is that "Since at least the time of Hegel, awareness has been growing that human consciousness evolves. Although being human means being a person and thus being unique and induplicable, growth in historical knowledge has made it apparent that the way in which a person feels himself or herself in the cosmos has evolved in a patterned fashion over the ages.... The evolution of consciousness through human history is marked by growth in articulate attention to the interior of the individual person as distanced - though not necessarily separated - from the communal structures in which each person is necessarily enveloped.... The interaction between the orality that all human beings are born into and the technology of writing, which no one is born into, touches the depths of the psyche.... Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well." 178-9.

that writing changes human consciousness because it leads to an interiorization of one's voice and a self-consciousness that does not exist in a primarily oral culture, where people define themselves, not by who they are to themselves, but by who they are to others. He argued that the act of reading and writing leads to introspection because the mind communicates with itself and this is what one finds, for example, in the excessive self-examination in certain Protestant sects of the early modern period. The implications of this shift for the history of Christianity lay in the fact that the Christian faith became something that was lived individually rather than experienced collectively. The individual's relationship to God came to be of greater importance than the village's *Corpus Christi* procession. The essence of the Reformation project was a desire to return to the written documents of the faith, as seen in Luther, and the moral teachings of Jesus, as apparent in Erasmus. And the consequences were a belief in the individual standing alone before God's judgement.

One consequence of this intellectualization of Christianity was a growing distinction between the educated elite and the masses. The Reformation was in fact part of a more widespread societal change, which is commonly labelled the Reformation of Manners.³ Increased literacy and education resulted in the growing separation of elite from popular culture. A conscious social agenda

³Pioneering work in this area was done by Norbert Elias, in his two-volume work, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Urizen Books), 1978.

was put into place, the creation of a bourgeois culture that was distinguishable from that of the masses.

Margaret Miles, in her book *Image as Insight*, examines the question of increased literacy and its effect on Reformation thought.⁴ She suggests that the change to a print culture had violent results, as it began to destabilize the existing social order. Using the distinction between elite and popular culture, she interprets iconoclasm, the smashing of visual representations, as part of the attempt by the lower classes to attain equality through appropriating elite, literate Christianity.⁵

Underlying the theological controversies of the period, there was in fact a common understanding of the need to civilize the masses. One of the goals of Erasmian humanism was the overall moral reform of society. Erasmus linked morality to manners in a way that went beyond the concept of manners in the medieval chivalric code and developed a new sense of *civilité*.⁶ The French equivalent to Erasmus' efforts is found in the work of Jean Sulpice de Saint Alban's treatise, which taught young men table manners, but also

⁴Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 123.

⁵Ibid., 107-14.

⁶Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print*, 78.

instructed them to pray to God the Father and to the Virgin, and to respect people in authority, including their parents.⁷

There was some tension at the heart of this project of moral reform. On the one hand, Erasmus democratized manners, by saying that all people, regardless of their rank, could keep themselves clean and behave in a moral, Christian manner. He rejected affected, aristocratic manners and set up an ideal which based itself on the belief that the body and the soul are one.⁸ On the other hand, such an attempt served to separate the literate elite from the masses.⁹ Many writings of the period, including those of Postel, scornfully dismissed the common people as "grossier." The role of the educated man in society and government was clearly articulated by Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie in his preface to his translation of Ficino's *Trois livres de la vie*. He described "learned and studious men of good letters" as:

those who serve as the eyes to others to see the real truth of things, and like little suns, to brighten the darkness of the brutal and ignorant people, as well as to philosophize with the princes,

⁷Jean Sulpice de Saint Alban, *Des bonnes meurs et honestes contenance que doit garder un jeune homme, tant a table qu'ailleurs, avec autres notables enseignemens*, trans. Pierre Broë (Lyon: Mace Bonhomme, 1555), 36-7.

⁸Ibid., 79. Chartier points out that the Erasmian link between Christian morality and manners was lost in subsequent centuries and that by the baroque period, civility came to signify only a set of manners which hid one's true motives. 108.

⁹See Weber, *Economy and Society* Vol. I, 514.

and to serve as the eyes or the windows for the government and administration of their kingdoms, peoples and lands.¹⁰

He equated what was noble with what was good, a basic precept of neoplatonic philosophy.¹¹ The educated elites separated themselves from the common people based on their moral superiority, grounded in newly-acquired knowledge and insight.

There were two goals which underlay the humanist agenda: the control of the self and the control of society. There were purportedly good reasons for this increased desire for social control. Catharine Lis argues that the economic and demographic changes of the early sixteenth century resulted in a population that outstripped the demand for labour. Increased mobility and migration led to greater concern, on the part of both Church and State, for social order.¹² With the impoverishment of the lower classes and increased vagabondage and crime, medieval attitudes of indiscriminate charity were eroded. Poverty was increasingly dealt with through official rather than unofficial channels; the poor were regulated through the poor laws, many of

¹⁰Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, preface to Ficino's *Les trois livres de la vie* (Paris: Abel l'Angelier, 1581), (unnumbered pages). "ceux qui servent d'yeux à plusieurs pour voir la vraye clarté des choses, et comme petits soleils, pour éclairer les tenebres des gents grossiers et ignorans, voire mesme pour philosopher avec les princes, et leur servir comme d'yeux ou de lunettes au gouvernement et administration de leurs royaumes, peuples, et seigneuries."

¹¹Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, *L'encyclie des secrets de l'eternité* (Anvers: Christophe Plantin, 1570), 73.

¹²Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, "Policing the Early Modern Proletariat," in *Proletarianization and Family History*, ed. David Levine (Orlando, Fla.: Academic Press, 1984), 172.

which were instituted in the 1530s.¹³ Lis suggests that one of the problems with a migrant population was that it received no instruction from its parish church.¹⁴ While this may be part of the reason why the Church responded with concern, it could also reflect the fact that the elites were better educated than they had been previously.

Lis' assertion that the lower classes were associated with the "ungodly" and that moral education was seen as the solution seems plausible. She shows that the upper and the middle classes, which began to identify with the elite, both feared the masses and tried to control them through education. Some of the humanist emphasis on education was derived from this fear. Likewise, church reform was also geared to better education for the clergy in the seventeenth century. There was real fear on the part of the upper classes; Luther's treatise, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Peasants*, written in the wake of the 1525 Peasants' Revolt, is only one example of the works which demonstrated this attitude; evidence is also found in the writings of Thomas More, Symphorien Champier, Richard Morison, and Nicholas Bolyr.¹⁵

There was also an increased concern for control at the individual level and this is apparent in the religious writing of the period. The control of the passions became a prominent theme. The sort of religious reform which

¹³Ibid., 168.

¹⁴Ibid., 172.

¹⁵Ibid., 216, footnote 15.

resulted from an increasingly literate, introspective class may not necessarily have been a conscious agenda, but may result quite naturally in a rejection of the body as something base and inferior. For example, Bodin, in his *Six Books of the Commonwealth*, considered sexual lust to be characteristic of the common people.¹⁶ It became commonplace to associate the lower classes with the physical urges and the upper classes with the intellect. Weber identified a connection between intellectualism and the rejection of the passions.¹⁷ He argued that often when an educated class begins a religious reform, it is characterized by such a rejection of the physical and the bodily. A reformation occurs when the lay intelligentsia has a background in philosophy and is relatively high on the social scale:

Quests for salvation which arise among privileged classes are generally characterized by a disposition toward an 'illumination' mysticism ... which is associated with a distinctively intellectual qualification for salvation. This brings about a strong devaluation of the natural, sensual, and physical, as constituting, according to their psychological experience, a temptation to deviate from this distinctive road to salvation.¹⁸

¹⁶James R. Farr, "The Pure and Disciplined Body: Hierarchy, Morality, and Symbolism in France During the Catholic Reformation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 21 (1991), 397.

¹⁷Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. I, 502.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 505.

Salvation is therefore defined in such a way that it fulfils the inner psychological needs of the intellectual, rather than the more immediate physical needs of the masses.¹⁹

The Catholic response to these issues is seen in increasing emphasis on the maintenance of hierarchy and the restriction of the passions. The Council of Trent, with its attempt at enforcing more stringent moral standards on the clergy, was a seminal force in creating the modern personality which focussed on restraining the passions in a markedly different way from the medieval personality. Margaret Miles suggests that while Protestants destroyed the means of worship, the Catholic reform was characterized by "... the confirmation of celestial, spiritual, and, by implication, ecclesiastical and social hierarchies."²⁰ An interesting insight is provided by James Farr who states that a concern with ideas of purity and hierarchy is related to "... boundary marking and boundary transgression."²¹ The social boundaries and the individual boundaries of acceptable behaviour coalesced.

It is within this context that one can examine the evolution of the role of women in the sixteenth century. While it may not necessarily have been the case that there was a deliberate agenda to wrest power away from women, they did lose power in a society that was rejecting popular beliefs for learned

¹⁹Ibid., 506.

²⁰Miles, *Image as Insight*, 124.

²¹Farr, "The Pure and Disciplined Body," 391.

ones.²² Women became victims on a large scale of society's attempt to become more "rational." To learned men, they represented, probably at an unconscious level, all that was unstable, frightening and medieval. Therefore they became objects of hostility in a world where few people had yet to have any kind of personal agency or freedom from the inexplicable forces larger than themselves, such as economic instability, war, and disease. The witch trials suggest that the fear of women and the need to redefine gender roles was at the heart of the restructuring of society.

The *querelle des femmes* was one forum for working out the dilemma created by an educated class who self-consciously rejected the body and the passions as plebian, yet needed to live with women and create families.²³ There was a dilemma that needed to be resolved by the upwardly mobile increasingly educated class; if they denigrated the masses for following their baser urges, then they needed to find some way to understand the place of women in society. This is the issue that was being debated in the literature of the *querelle*.

Again, Protestant and Catholic reformers attempted to attain the same end through different means. Part of the Protestant agenda was the masculinization of Christianity and the removal of imagery, symbol, ritual and

²²One component of this shift is seen in the professionalization of the medicine, which led to female healers losing credibility in the face of university-trained physicians.

²³Farr, "The Pure and Disciplined Body," 397.

worship of intermediaries such as the Virgin because it was the domain of sentiment. This is seen in the language used by Luther and Calvin, as opposed to the rich maternal imagery in Postel and in the Catholic Church in general. For Luther, the archetypal woman was no longer the virgin, but the bourgeois housewife.

Claude-Gilbert Dubois provides an interesting explanation for this shift in Protestant theology. He argues that there is an inverse relationship between the idealization of women, for example in theology or literature, and their status in the social sphere. It is for this reason that one finds women idealized within Catholic theology to a greater extent than within Protestant theology.²⁴ Dubois suggests that Protestants diminished the view of woman as holy mother or object of worship when they allowed clergy to marry. Protestantism destroyed the erotic mysticism which characterized the medieval Church.²⁵ There is a certain irony in the fact that Protestants had a more realistic attitude toward sexuality and gender relations, but at the same time, their imagery of God was less corporeal and more transcendent. Conversely those theologians who denigrated the existence of the needs of the body used imagery which suggests that they were compensating for their denial of what are, after all, genuine human needs.

²⁴Dubois, "Les métamorphoses mystiques," 176.

²⁵Ibid., 178.

The Catholic attempt to reconcile the contradictory views of women and of the body was worked out through neoplatonist philosophy. The Neoplatonists who spoke favourably of women did so from a sense of the injustice of misogyny. Part of this was a Catholic justification for marriage; that is, a way to show that women were indeed worth marrying. It was a way of undoing the generally misogynist tendencies among the ostensibly celibate priesthood. Neoplatonism became a way of infusing human relations with a spirituality that was consistent with Catholic faith. Whereas Protestants argued that marriage was good for practical reasons, the Catholic neoplatonists argued that marriage could itself be a spiritual state. In order to retain their neoplatonic view of hierarchy and accept the state of marriage, however, they had to make a strong distinction between spiritual love and physical love. They retained the characteristic dichotomy between spirit and body.

What is significant about this view is that, although it was considered generally favourable toward women, it still meant that ultimately, the female was almost dehumanized through being objectified. Sixteenth-century writings on women do not deal with women as individuals. Rather Woman conceived as archetype was a way of working out male psychological tensions. Feminist writers, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, have pointed out that when men have objectified women, they have also dehumanized them.²⁶ In *The Second*

²⁶For example, see Luce Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, 122.

Sex, she stated that "To pose Woman is to pose the absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being."²⁷ Woman as Other becomes the object onto which Man projects both his fears and his desires, but in both cases, she is denied the right to be who she is.

If this idea is correct, that the objectifying of women is related to a denial of their recognition of worth as fellow humans, this would be apparent in the work of the neoplatonists. Their writings do indeed bear this out. Women are portrayed as beautiful objects, but silent ones.²⁸ In the neoplatonic mindset, women were not loved for who they were, since men could not love something inferior to themselves, but they were admired for what they represented.²⁹ The essence of love as defined by the Neoplatonists denied women their common humanity with men.

Postel appropriated this view of women. For all of his glorification of women, he was vehement that a woman should never sit on the French throne. They possessed no inherent qualities which would permit them to govern either the Church or the State.³⁰ For Postel, saintly women were merely vessels for the divine presence. It was by virtue of their inferiority that they

²⁷Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 286.

²⁸Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology*, 73.

²⁹Ficino, *Discours de l'honneste amour*, 56.

³⁰"De la consequence et futurs effectz de la Loy Salike," BN.ms.f.fr.2113, fol.22v.

showed more strongly the power of the divine, who was able to work through them.

What can be seen among the Catholic Neoplatonists, including Postel, is the converse of the misogyny of thinkers who saw celibacy as the greatest virtue and feared women as evil temptresses. The Neoplatonists put women on a pedestal and worshipped them for their qualities of beauty and chastity. In both cases, the abstract concept of Woman was invoked in a way that had little to do with women as people. When Woman is objectified she becomes the object of both Man's fears and his aspirations. The irony inherent in the attitude of the Neoplatonists toward women is that, even though it exalted them, it was firmly based on the assumption that women were inferior to men. It was only by being transformed into something divine that they became acceptable as the recipients of Man's love. The spiritualization of beauty served to justify to men their attraction to women and rationalized their need for them. This conceptualization of women was a means of dealing with male anxiety over the power of passion, at both an individual and collective level.

Luce Irigaray considers the objectification of women as the central feature of Aristotelian philosophy. Her explanation for such an assertion is that women become the means for men to set boundaries:

If, traditionally, in the role of mother, woman represents a sense of *place* for man, such a limit means that she becomes a *thing*, undergoing certain optional changes from one historical period to another. She finds herself defined as a thing. Moreover, the mother woman is also used as a kind of envelope by man in order to help him set limits to things. The *relationship between the*

envelope and the things represents one of the aporia, if not the aporia, of Aristotelianism and the philosophical systems which are derived from it.³¹

This insight serves to illustrate what Woman represented for Postel. In terms of the social situation of his time, Postel can be seen as a participant in the movement to regulate society through religion. In this, his views were consistent with those of the Catholic Church. Moreover, because of her inferiority, the female was a suitable vehicle for chastising the existing powers and Postel called on the figure of Joanna in this regard. However, Postel's greater concern was for the individual's relationship to God and it is here that his use of female imagery is most interesting. Like other Neoplatonists, he considered women to be spiritual because they were infused with virtue from the heavens. Where Postel differed from his peers was in his conviction that he himself was a prophet and that he had found a female saviour. Postel must have derived a certain amount of comfort from the system he created, in which he was watched over, protected and surrounded by a divine mother. His encounter with Joanna, whom he referred to as his mother, no doubt was the embodiment of those qualities which he sought in his connection with the divine. For Postel, God Himself was so great and so distant, that the only way he could feel that he was in contact with the divine was through a female component, which was more immanent and therefore closer to him. The

³¹Irigaray, "Sexual Difference," in *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*, 122.

female became the *place*, in the sense that Irigaray uses the word, where the divine and human worlds intersected.

Postel took the basic concepts of neoplatonic philosophy to an extreme. He shared with others the need to project his desires for wholeness and integration with God onto the figure of the female. Moreover, he displayed a comparable split between the veneration of the female in the spiritual realm and the denial of power to her in the public realm. The neoplatonist attempt to spiritualize women was a way of reworking the misogyny of the traditional view of a church which valued celibacy and therefore needed to denigrate woman as temptress. It spiritualized Woman as a way of supporting the concept of marriage over the monastic ideal. However, the solution, to make her into a saint, continued the same process of denying her humanity.

While Postel shared many ideas with other Neoplatonists of his day, his imagery remained much more positive towards women than that of many of his contemporaries. He defined mercy and forgiveness as essentially female, for example. While he subordinated Woman to Man and believed in strict hierarchy, he nonetheless located - not power, of course - but potential, at the level where the divine and the corporal worlds intermingle, at the level of the female. In the same way that he saw the King deriving authority from the Pope, which allowed him temporal rule, the Woman would possess the power of salvation.

Postel's religious views are interesting in the context of current trends in religious thought. One of the most striking developments in contemporary theology is feminist theology, such as that developed by Mary Daly, Judith Plaskow and Rosemary Ruether.³² Feminist theology challenges Judeo-Christian theology as a male construct and posits the development of a male God as justification for patriarchy. Part of this critique is that the Judeo-Christian God is an utterly transcendent being with power over humans. Feminist theologians tend to stress the immanent nature of God.³³ There is an interesting similarity between this and Postel's emphasis.

One difficulty in such a move, however, is that it simply reinforces the stereotypes that man is rational and woman, emotional, or that man is associated with the spirit and woman with the body. There is a danger that in reclaiming a sort of female description of God, that theologians perpetuate the sort of dichotomies that may be better broken down. This is a major point of debate in feminist circles. In her analysis of feminist use of Kabbalah, Adele Reinhartz highlights the fact that by using the imagery of the Shekhinah in

³²A useful introduction to the field is *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); see also Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

³³Sally B. Purvis, "Christian Feminist Spirituality," in *Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 3: *Post-Reformation and Modern*, eds. Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 507.

the Kabbalah, the notion of what is feminine is once again limited to the sphere of corporality.³⁴ However, if an understanding of those attributes of the divine that are traditionally defined as feminine can help to bridge the gap between the self and the divine, so much the better.

For Luther and Calvin, God was the means of escaping from themselves and their own awareness of sin. The search for transcendence was an escape from the Self. The depiction of an immanent God reflects a different need, a desire for a comforter. Postel did not have a keen awareness of sin; if he did, it was expressed as ignorance. Rather, what seems to have motivated him in his spiritual quest was loneliness. His search for connection was fulfilled through a divine figure who was comforter and Mother.

Postel's theology of Joanna was a means for arguing for control of the body through its salvation and elevation. Woman represented that which was truly human and in need of redemption. Because of this, his focus was on everything feminine, or inferior, since the two terms were virtually synonymous for him. The language he used to describe the redemptive activity brought about through the female reflected a need to connect with a maternal figure and find comfort and solace in a harsh world. His message was ultimately one of forgiveness, as was Luther's. Postel's unique contribution to the sixteenth-century project to redefine God was to emphasize the maternal

³⁴Adele Reinhartz, "Les Discours théologiques féministes juifs," *Concilium: Revue internationale de théologie*, 263 (1996), 92.

aspects of the divine. It is ironic that this Catholic writer, whose primary motivation was to preserve what was being disputed and discarded in his time, would express the same spiritual concepts as those of feminist theologians several centuries later. What this suggests is that, in the history of Christian spirituality, no more powerful metaphor for God's relationship to humanity has yet been found than that of our relationships with one other.

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De nativitate Mediatoris ultima, nunc futura, et toti orbi terrarum in singulis ratione praeditis manifestanda, opus in quo totius naturae obscuritas, origo et creatio, ita cum sua causa illustratur, exponiturque, ut vel pueris sint manifesta, quae in Theosofiae et filosofiae arcanis hactenus fuere. Autore Spiritu Christi. Ex scriptore Gulielmo Postello, Apostolica professione sacerdote. n.p., 1546.

Πανθενωσια [*Panthenosia*]: sive compositio omnium dissidiorum circa aeternam veritatem aut versimilitudinem versantium, quae non solum inter eos, qui hodie Infidelium, Judaeorum, Haereticorum, et Catholicorum nomine vocantur, orta sunt et vigent, sed jam ab admissis per peccatum, circa nostrum intellectum, tenebris fuere inter Ecclesiae peculiaris et communis membra. [1547] Basle: Oporin, 1561.

Les raisons de la monarchie, et quelz moyens sont necessaires pour y parvenir, là ou sont compris en brief les tresadmirables, et de nul jusques aujourd'huy tout ensemble considerez privileges et droictz, tant divins, celestes comme humains, de la gent gallicque, et des princes par icelle esleuz, et approuvez. Paris, n.p.: 1551.

Abrahami Patriarchae liber Jezirah sive formationis mundi, patribus quidem, Abrahami tempora praecedentibus revelatus, sed ab ipso etiam Abrahamo expositus Isaaco, et per prophetarum manus posteritati conservatus, ipsis autem LXXII Mosis auditoribus in secundo divinae veritatis loco, hoc est in Ratione, quae est posterior autoritate, habitus. Paris: n.p., 1552.

De foenicum literis, seu de prisco latinae et graecae linguae caractere eiusque antiquissima origine et usu, ad Carolum Cardinalem et principem Lotharingiaeium, commentatiuncula. Paris: Vivantium Gaultherot, 1552.

L'histoire memorable des expeditions depuys le deluge faictes par les Gauloys ou François depuis la France jusques en Asie, ou en Thrace et en l'orientale partie de l'Europe, et des commodités ou incommodités des divers chemins pour y parvenir et retourner. Paris: Sebastian Nivelles, 1552.

Liber de causis seu de principiis et originibus naturae utriusque, in quo ita de aeterna rerum veritate agitur, ut et autoritate et ratione non tantum ubiuis particularis Dei providentia, sed et animorum et corporum immortalitas ex ipsius Aristotelis verbis recte intellectis et non detortis demonstratur clarissime. Paris: Sebastian Nivelles, 1552.

La loy salique, livret de la premiere humaine verité, là ou sont en brief les origines et auctoritez de la loy gallique nommée communement salique, pour monstrier a quel poinct fauldra necessairement en la Gallique Republique venir; et que de ladicta Republique sortira ung monarche temporel. Paris: [Sebastian Nivelles], 1552.

Protevangelion sive de natalibus Jesu Christi, et ipsius matris Virginis Mariae, sermo historicus divi Jacobi Minoris, consobrini et fratris Domini Jesu,

apostoli primarii, et episcopi Christianorum primi Hierosolymis. [Basle: Oporin, 1552].

Resolution eternele destinée au Roy et peuple treschrestien. Pour obtenir la vraye et finale victoire, qui est celle des coeurs de tout le monde, faisant qu'il despende pour le vray, et tant de Dieu que du Ciel ordonné Empire les Biens, la Vie et l'Honneur. n.p., 1552.

Tabula aeternae ordinationis quaternario constituto inter summae expansionis et coactionis terminos, expositae: ut pataet clarissime, quatuor elementorum rationem maxime in spirituali sicut et in elementari sensibilive natura esse constitutam, propter restitutionem omnium. n.p., [1552].

Tabula restitutionis omnium constitutionem naturalium et supernaturalium rerum, quatuor elementis in sensum et intellectum humanum conducendarum, ad perfectissimam Divinae Bonitatis admirationem conscripta a G. Postello, ut immutationis, metennoseos constet orbi Ratio. n.p., [1552].

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