Se than I saye what we have to conferme those thynges that be taught us by the chyrche. Fyrst the prophetes that were instructed by the father almyghty god, and also theyr Cabala, that is to saye theyr secrete erudycyons not wryten in the byble.

St. John Fisher

This endorsement of Cabala by St. John Fisher, a conservative and notably prudent man (he lost his head over only one issue), should give pause to those who would dismiss Christian Cabala as a phenomenon of little importance, an intellectual dead end. To demonstrate the importance of Cabala, however, would be the work of volumes rather than a brief essay. My intention here is to advance some tentative observations on what the phenomenon of Cabala has to tell us about Jewish-Christian relations in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Even such a modest task is not without difficulties. Kabbalah in its many Jewish forms is fraught with puzzles and problems, especially to the outsider. I take comfort in the words of Chaim Wirszubski who said, “Kabbalah, being a mystical discipline, has never been plain sailing; to be baffled and confused by it is no reproach to anyone.” Even Christian Cabala, a less complex phenomenon than Kabbalah itself, is devious, perplexing and not sufficiently studied.

John Fisher’s quotation represents a view held in a number of circles in the early sixteenth century, one that can be fleshed out by turning to a passage in Luigi Ricchieri’s *Lectionum antiquarum* which appeared in 1517. Ricchieri, who depended largely on Giovanni Pico della Mirandola for his information, distinguished three forms of Jewish thought: talmudic Judaism which is heretical; philosophical Judaism which is late and therefore can be discounted; and cabalistic Judaism, which is “the oldest of all, and true more than any other, because established opinion is that it was made known to Moses by the best and greatest God.” The development of this distinction

between three forms of Judaism has much to tell us about the origins of Cabala and Jewish-Christian relations in the later Middle Ages.

I. BACKGROUND

Christian attitudes toward the Jews underwent significant changes around the year 1100, though the extent of these and the history of their effects is still subject to debate. The new militancy expressed in the First Crusade (1095–99) has often been thought to mark a major turning point, though this has recently been disputed. The intellectual shift in Christian perceptions of the Jews in the twelfth century suggests that more weight should be given to the figure of the converted Jew Petrus Alfonsi than most students of Jewish-Christian relations have hitherto allowed. Baptized in 1106, Petrus wrote his Dialogi contra Judaeos in 1110. As John Tolan has shown, "...the Dialogues were the best-known and most influential anti-Jewish text in the Middle Ages." The text is found in 79 manuscripts (63 in its entirety, 16 in excerpts), as well in precis form in the more than 200 manuscripts of Vincent of Beauvais' Speculum historiale (see book 25). Petrus is best known as the first author to attack the Talmud for its failure to conform to reason and therefore its inferiority to Christianity. While it is true that Petrus does not specifically describe Rabbinic Judaism as a heresy, nor does he use that claim as a basis for a call to persecution or elimination of the Jews, it is evident that the approach that led to the condemnation of the Talmud in 1240 and the view found throughout the late Middle Ages and Renaissance that talmudic Judaism was a heresy has a prototype in his widely disseminated work.

Less noticed has been Petrus's attitude toward the other types of Judaism, philosophical and mystical, that Pico, Ricchieri and others later distinguished in explicit fashion. The defense of Christianity that occupies Dialogi VI–XII describes two kinds of Christian teachings: those that can be proved by reason, primarily creation and the Trinity (!); and the Christological teachings that reason can show are possible but that depend on the auctoritas of Scripture. Petrus's discussion of the rationality of belief in creation uses elements from Saadia Gaon's Book of Beliefs and Opinions, thus showing a willingness to make use of Jewish philosophical materials that presages the broader encounter between Scholasticism and Jewish philosophy that marked the period c. 1150–1325. The discussion of the rational grounds for belief in the Trinity shows an even more remarkable encounter, one that I take to be the first between medieval Jewish mysticism and Christian thought.

In demonstrating the three persons of the Trinity in dialogue VI, Petrus appears to criticize Saadia and philosophical Judaism and to uncover a proof