

Brach, Jean-Pierre

**Illicit Christianity : Guillaume Postel, Kabbalah and a "transgender" Messiah**

*Religio*. 2019, vol. 27, iss. 1, pp. [3]-15

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/141540>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

# *Illicit Christianity: Guillaume Postel, Kabbalah and a “Transgender” Messiah*

JEAN-PIERRE BRACH

Even within the field or framework of Western esotericism as such, there are of course many more ways of being “consciously illicit” that I can possibly hope to address in this paper. I shall therefore limit myself to trying to display here, through the case study of William (Guillaume) Postel, some characteristics of the often conflicting dynamics between social life, public opinion, esoteric tenets and spiritual claims.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, such characteristics will not just illustrate singular or personal instances of more general and contemporary attitudes but also a whole range of psychological nuances and cultural contradictions regarding the conflicts between spiritual self-promotion and its eventual acceptance or rejection by society.<sup>2</sup>

## **Scandalous esotericism?**

Hailed by many as a great Humanist, a profound – if perhaps confused or even deluded at times – thinker and as a soft-spoken and peaceful individual, Postel was almost as often bad-mouthed by others as a cesspool of heterodoxy and a loud-speaker of religious and doctrinal provocation. He was also accused by some – an accusation which has been levelled against other Christian Kabbalists as well – of concealing his deviant perspectives behind the dark veils of “esotericism”,<sup>3</sup> essentially understood here as a vehicle for errant biblical hermeneutics, self-aggrandizement and judaizing, since I need hardly remind anyone that no umbrella term such as “esotericism” actually existed in Postel’s time.

It being of course impossible to follow our author through the loops of all the vagaries engendered by his numerous and successive spiritual cri-

- 
- 1 Georges Weill – François Secret, *Vie et caractère de Guillaume Postel*, Paris: Archè – Les Belles Lettres 1987.
  - 2 Jean-Pierre Brach, “Spiritual Authority and the Transmission of Knowledge in Christian Kabbalah: The Case of Guillaume Postel (1510-81)”, in: Andreas Kilcher (ed.), *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, (Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism 11), Leiden – Boston: Brill 2010, 303-321.
  - 3 Claude-Gilbert Dubois, “Rationalisme et ésotérisme dans l’oeuvre de Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)”, in: James Dauphiné (ed.), *Création littéraire et traditions ésotériques (XV<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Biarritz: J & D Editions 1991, 57-68.

ses, I have mainly singled out three aspects of Postel's most singular infringements on the traditionally received tenets of Roman Catholic faith: 1) the claim of having been personally invested of an important eschatological role by a feminine messiah – no other than Jesus-Christ come again in the flesh as a woman; 2) that of being the “born-again” and “substantial” son of this woman and of her mystical spouse, Jesus, in charge of ushering in the penultimate Age of the Restitution of all things;<sup>4</sup> 3) last – and much less discernible to the public eye – the shaping of his own “reformed” version of Christianity according to certain key Kabbalistic doctrines, extracted from his understanding of them in the *Zohar*.

All these themes have their origin in a pivotal period of Postel's life, the two-and-a-half years he spent in Venice between late 1546 and the summer of 1549 and the major “illumination” he thought he experienced at the time, the consequences of which were to last all his life.<sup>5</sup> If only for the sake of clarity, I shall not attempt to examine these three threads separately and in succession, since they are too intimately interwoven and constitute a blend of metaphysics, anthropology, messianism and cosmology almost impossible to unravel in detail.

In examining these claims, and the breaching of the religious conventions they entail, I shall naturally take into account some of the specificities of the perception of religious transgression in Postel's time, at least inasmuch as they are linked to his particular case. In this respect, I believe that the categories and reactions involved are in fact quite traditional, compared to earlier (that is, late medieval) European understandings of what theological and spiritual transgression consisted of. Postel, for instance, steers a very ambiguous and winding course between his reputation as a scholar (and priest) and the very humble original social status he proudly claimed and, as a matter of fact, shared with many so-called heretics of the late medieval period.<sup>6</sup> Because of the self-appointed mission described above, he is equally concerned with making an impact not just on scholars

---

4 The apparent internal contradiction between these two statements will find its explanation below (p. 7 and 9).

5 Giuseppe Ellero, “Postel e Venezia”, in: coll., *Guillaume Postel 1581-1981: Actes du colloque international d'Avanches 5-9 septembre 1981*, Paris: Guy Trédaniel – Editions de la Maisnie 1985, 23-28; Marion L. Kuntz (ed.), *Postello, Venezia e il suo mondo*, (Civiltà veneziana: Saggi), Florence: Olschki 1988; Cesare Vasoli, “L' ‘homo novus restitutus’ di Guillaume Postel: Gli anni veneziani”, in: id., *Filosofia e religione nella cultura del Rinascimento*, Naples: Guidi 1988, 323-360; Jean-Pierre Brach, “Dieu fait femme: Guillaume Postel et l'illumination vénitienne”, in: Michel Cazenave (ed.), *La face féminine de Dieu*, (L'instant nécessaire), Paris: Noësis 1998, 41-62.

6 Gabriele Zanella, “La culture des hérétiques italiens (XII<sup>e</sup>-XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)”, in: Isabelle Heullant-Donat (ed.), *Cultures italiennes (XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, (Initiations au Moyen Age), Paris: Les éditions du Cerf 2007, 345-373.

and theologians,<sup>7</sup> but on society as a whole, so that his theories do not just amount to abstract erudition but concern people in general and find their meaning and application in everyday life, as well as in the politics – mundane or ecclesiastical – of his day. That the general (and all too common) charge of heterodoxy is also heavily involved in his case goes without saying but it seems to me, as we shall see, that Postel’s ways of being “consciously illicit” were actually carried out in a spirit which was essentially – and more or less consciously – that of provocation, more than anything else.

Spiritual provocation, or willingly scandalizing one’s contemporaries by expressing outlandish religious views, was of course nothing new in Postel’s time. Among Christian Kabbalists, to mention but a slightly earlier case, what better example than that of the young Pico della Mirandola, publicly stating that magic and Kabbalah constituted the most effective proof in favour of Christ’s divinity?<sup>8</sup> It is of course impossible to imagine even the brash young Pico of 1486 (who was not exactly encumbered by intellectual modesty or shyness) totally unaware of the most obvious potential outcome of this kind of statement, just as we are equally hard put to believe that the outcry following his revelation of the feminine messiah came as a complete surprise to a largely unsuspecting Postel.

As already noted some 40 years ago by F. Secret, Postel oscillated throughout his life between candidness and retraction over his most daring theological and esoteric propositions, an attitude which implies at least some degree of awareness of the reality and potential consequences of the scandal he was causing.<sup>9</sup> In doing so – that is, in causing scandal – it is quite likely that Postel imagined he was closely imitating his declared spiritual model, Jesus-Christ himself, whose predication and actions also frequently came as a shock to his contemporaries. Precisely, in Postel’s case, and most especially in the examples we’ve selected in this paper, scandal essentially stemmed from the public airing of his unconventional doctrines, much more than from any outward, seemingly condemnable behaviour of his (morally speaking or otherwise).

---

7 In contrast with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), whose invitation to the learned debate he intended to stage in Rome in early 1487 (and which eventually never took place) was solely extended to such specialists.

8 Stephen A. Farmer (ed.), *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486): With Text, Translation and Commentary*, (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 167), Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 1998, 496-497.

9 François Secret (ed.), *Guillaume Postel: Apologies et Rétractions: Manuscrits inédits publiés avec une introduction et des notes par François Secret*, (Bibliotheca Humanistica et Reformatorica 3), Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf 1972.

## A chance-meeting in Venice

Having been ordained as a priest in Rome in 1544, Postel manifested thereafter a lifelong intention to conform his lifestyle to that recommended by the first Jesuits he unsuccessfully tried to join during the following year, that is to live in “poverty, scorn and misery”,<sup>10</sup> in close imitation of Jesus-Christ.

Around October 1546, Postel initiated his second stay in Venice and almost immediately came into contact with a woman in her fifties (named Giovanna, or Joanna) ministering to the poor and the sick in a hospital (or asylum) where he had just become chaplain in residence. A consecrated virgin, and a stigmatized visionary, she apparently experienced visions and private revelations, the contents of which she communicated to Postel, whom she had elected as her confessor and spiritual advisor.<sup>11</sup>

For a period of about 18 months, both shared their mutual discovery and joint certainty of being among the elect chosen to usher in the Era of the “Restitution” of mankind, which they expected to be imminent.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, they had in common the inner conviction of being the “angelic pope”, whose mission it was, according to Joachim of Fiore, to preside over this final period of the religious and political history of mankind.<sup>13</sup> The only difference was that “Madre Zuana”<sup>14</sup> entrusted the public revelation of their mission to the sole Postel, who was only too willing to proceed with it since he was already convinced, before coming to Venice (and like so many others at the time or even in European history), of having such a distinguished prophetic role to play.

This role entailed two things in particular: the public announcement of their joint spiritual privileges, and claims of personal transformation in order to attest the reality of their mission.

10 François Secret, “Notes sur Guillaume Postel”, *Bulletin d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 39/3, 1977, 573-590.

11 G. Weill – F. Secret, *Vie et caractère...*, 72-79; Jean-François Maillard, „Postel le cosmopolite: Quelques documents nouveaux“, in: Sylvain Matton (ed.), *Documents oubliés sur l’alchimie, la kabbale et Guillaume Postel... offerts à François Secret*, Genève: Droz 2001, 197-222: 198.

12 Claude-Gilbert Dubois, “Guillaume Postel et la doctrine de l’avènement du ‘nouveau monde’”, in: Jean-Raymond Fanlo – André Tournon (eds.), *Formes du millénarisme en Europe à l’aube des temps modernes: Actes du Colloque international de l’Association Renaissance, Humanisme, Réforme (Marseille, 10-12 septembre 1998)*, Paris: Champion 2001, 217-231.

13 Marjorie Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future: A Medieval Study in Historical Thinking*, Stroud: Sutton 1999.

14 “Mother Giovanna”, in the Venetian dialect.

### The feminine messiah

Following – emulating, even – some well-known passages of Scripture (from Saint Paul, in particular),<sup>15</sup> Postel theorizes that “being a member of Christ’s mystical body” implies actual, corporeal participation in the “substance” of Jesus, by way of communion to the Eucharist. He, therefore, construes “Joanna” as the “New Eve”, made (like the first one)<sup>16</sup> from the Second Adam’s flesh or “substance”. This “substance” is not taken here in an exclusively material sense, but as encompassing the psychic and the spiritual realms as well, considered as a whole. Obsessed ever since his first great spiritual crisis (1542) with the quaternary and its universal cosmic symbolism, Postel develops the theory of a four-fold hierarchy of man’s spiritual powers, in Christ’s image and likeness.<sup>17</sup> These four different souls – or powers of the soul – are composed of a *mens*, *spiritus*, *animus* and *anima* (in descending order). According to Postel, the two inferior elements (or “lower, feminine half”, along with the body itself) are still expecting their redemption since they can only be redeemed by the coming of the *feminine* messiah, insofar as Christ’s own *mens* and *spiritus* supposedly shroud Joanna’s *animus* and *anima*, within her outwardly feminine body; so that she is in fact being adumbrated by the upper half of the “substance” of Jesus himself. As the New Eve, she also embodies the lower – “feminine” – half of his “substance”, in order to redeem it in human individuals, just as the upper half was previously redeemed in mankind by Christ’s first (and masculine) advent.

This curious tenet is coupled with that of the four advents or comings of Christ, of which three were already well-known (they had been made classic by St Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> century) and the fourth one is that of Joanna herself.<sup>18</sup> This fourth manifestation of the messiah is called by Postel the “Fourth Term” or manifestation of “Created Wisdom”, through which God acts and communicates with individual beings – and it obviously coincides with the appearance of Joanna herself, that is of Jesus “substantially” manifested in her.

---

15 *Eph.* 3,6; 4,12-16; etc. It should be noted that Postel’s “esoteric” reading of Scripture and/or the Kabbalah frequently relies on a literalist – that is, pushed to its ultimate consequences – interpretation of the texts.

16 *Gen.* 2,21-24.

17 Peter A. Redpath, “The Nature of Woman and Her Role in Religion”, in: coll., *Guillaume Postel 1581-1981: Actes du colloque international d’Avranches 5-9 septembre 1981*, Paris: Guy Trédaniel – Editions de la Maisnie 1985, 137-149; J.-P. Brach, “Dieu fait femme...”, 47-52.

18 It is the object of his *De nativitate mediatoris ultima*, Basel: J. Oporin 1547.

## Swapping bodies

Moreover, it must be noted that we are faced here with a complex and yet strangely explicit theory of the exchange of “astral” or – as Postel puts it – “celestial” bodies between Christ and a few elect believers, in which these “subtle bodies” manifest different levels of spiritual attainment. This exchange eventually culminates in Postel himself receiving in turn Giovanna’s “subtle body”, in order to become her and Jesus’ “substantial son”, as we are about to see now. One may also remark that, on Christ’s Second Coming, the faithful as a whole will in turn be endowed with another, different “ethereal” or “glorious” body, manifesting their final salvation.

Leaving Venice for the Holy Land in 1549, Postel came back after Easter 1551, only to find his “Mother Joanna” deceased. At this point, apart from himself, nobody was or could actually be aware of their meeting and of his ensuing mission. If he finally waited until 1553 to actually mention her name publicly for the first time, and to describe what he thought were the inescapable consequences of their joint spiritual assignment,<sup>19</sup> it is because he was expecting the fulfilment of the mystical promises she had apparently made to him in Venice. Back in Paris, in the first days of January 1552, Postel underwent what he called his *immutatio*: one night, during an illness, and thinking he was about to die, he had a vision of Joanna standing in heaven besides Jesus, in her “celestial” body; after which he persuaded himself to have experienced – during this same night of the Epiphany – death, resurrection and judgment and, finally, through God’s mercy (on account of his impending mission), to have had his own inner “substance” cleansed and substituted by Joanna’s “celestial” body. This body being – as we have seen – united to Jesus’ “substance”, Postel deduced from his experience that he had finally received the total “substance” of Jesus – minus his divine nature! – and thus had become, as promised by his “Mother” in Venice, her “substantial son” and that of his father Jesus as well.<sup>20</sup>

It goes without saying that none of these visions was understood by Postel as holding a merely metaphorical or symbolical meaning: on the contrary, he was convinced that this so-called transmutation of both his inner “substance” and corporeal nature was an ontological prerequisite to

---

19 Jean Dupèbe, “Poursuites contre Postel en 1553”, in: coll., *Guillaume Postel 1581-1981: Actes du colloque international d’Avranches 5-9 septembre 1981*, Paris: Guy Trédaniel – Editions de la Maisnie 1985, 29-39.

20 Jean-Pierre Brach, “Son of the Son of God: The Feminine Messiah and Her Progeny, according to Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)”, in: Olav Hammer (ed.), *Alternative Christs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, 113-130.

the public revelation of his mission, enabling him to eventually fulfil it and providing “external” proof of its authenticity, at the same time. As a consequence of this event, Postel claimed to have obtained physical “immortality” and offered to be put to the test, either by being burned at the stake or by drowning!

From the point of view of Western esotericism, on top of the “subtle body” theory, we have here a highly personal Renaissance version of “spiritual alchemy” – that is, of inner transformation understood physically, as Christ internally transmuting the psychic and corporeal nature of the individual and, thus, operating his/her “divinization”.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Age of the Restitution**

The extension of the redemptive process to the physical and material dimension of the human body naturally correlates, in Postel’s thought, with the coming of the Age of the Restitution of mankind, of which he fondly imagines to be both the first-born and the spiritual herald. The so-called Restitution is supposed to cover the last, penultimate period of history before the Last Judgment, and to allow mankind a merciful interval in which to be spiritually and physically cleansed of the consequences of the original sin. In such a renewal of the corporeal “substance” of the elect lies the deepest meaning of the Restitution and it seemed obvious to Postel (and possibly to Joanna as well) that they should both personally undergo such a transformation before he could actually proceed with the task of publicly proclaiming the incoming Age. For sin to be definitively erased in its “substantial” and bodily dimension, it was therefore necessary – as we have seen above rapidly – that the New Eve, or “feminine part” of Jesus-Christ, in close relation to the physical side of human individuality, should first be manifested in the advent of the feminine messiah, and then by Postel himself, imbued – as he imagined he was – with her “substance” and that of Jesus himself.

To sum it up, the Era of the Restitution is equally meant to coincide with this process of exchanging souls, which had begun with Jesus and Joanna, and with its extension to mankind in general. It is definitely against such a background – considered by him as the result of a divinely ordained and therefore inescapable universal law, on the metaphysical, anthropological and cosmic planes – that Postel interprets the meaning of his becoming the “substantial” son of Joanna “and of her spouse Jesus”.<sup>22</sup>

---

21 We must nevertheless keep in mind that Postel never claimed a divine nature or strictly messianic status for himself.

22 J.-P. Brach, “Dieu fait femme...”, 52-56; Yvonne Petry, *Gender, Kabbalah and the Reformation: The Mystical Theology of Guillaume Postel*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2004,



## Kabbalistic Christianity

The multiple consequences triggered by his meeting with Joanna, his “immutation” and the ensuing necessity for him to herald publicly the Era of the Restitution bring up another aspect – though perhaps a more arcane one, and hitherto mostly overlooked – of Postel’s spiritual attitudes. It is also during this spiritually fateful Venetian stay that Postel started working on the first version of his partial translation of the *Zohar*.<sup>23</sup> A few years later, in a 1555 booklet published in Italian,<sup>24</sup> Postel emphatically credited Joanna (who was moreover, by his own admission, illiterate!) with helping him, on several occasions, to understand some difficult passages in the text.<sup>25</sup>

This is, by the way, one of the factors which impressed him most and led him to the conviction that she exhibited mystical knowledge far beyond her expected natural capacities, and which could only betray a divine source of inspiration. The fact that Postel – like so many other Christian Kabbalists<sup>26</sup> – considered the *Zohar* to be an antique document and its contents as essentially consonant with Christian doctrine, led him to yet another conspicuous breach of orthodoxy. Although seemingly quite difficult to reconcile with the Trinitarian perspective, the discovery in the text of four metaphysical entities making up some sort of a divine Pleroma (Father, Mother, Son and Daughter)<sup>27</sup> prophetically confirmed, for Postel, his understanding of the feminine messiah and of her role, not to forget the mystical importance of the quaternary. Such views are not just an expression of deep scholarship or of a dazzling theosophical virtuosity but outline, for him, the positive future of Christianity and the next stage in its evolution on both the spiritual and the historical planes. As we have seen,

---

95-116; Alain Ekorong, “Guillaume Postel, the Shechinah and the Feminine Principle”, in: Kathleen P. Long (ed.), *Gender and Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Culture*, Oxford – New York: Routledge 2016 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 2010), 41-62.

- 23 Judith Weiss, *A Kabbalistic Christian Messiah in the Renaissance: Guillaume Postel and the Book of Zohar*, (Heilal Ben Haim Series), Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House 2016 [Hebrew]; ead., *On the Conciliation of Nature and Grace, Restituted into One: A Latin Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on the Zohar by Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 2017 [Hebrew]. On Postel’s second *Zohar* version, see ead., “The Source of Guillaume Postel’s 1553 *Zohar* Latin Translation”, *Renaissance Studies* 29, 2014, 247-260.
- 24 Guillaume Postel, *Le prime nove dell’altro mondo, cioe... la Vergine veneziana*, n.p./n.d. (Padua 1555).
- 25 G. Weill – F. Secret, *Vie et caractère...*, 203-207.
- 26 François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les kabbalistes chrétiens*, (Études juives 10), Paris – The Hague: Mouton 1964 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1958).
- 27 *Zohar* III, 290a-291a (*Idra Zuta; The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* IX, ed. and trans. Daniel C. Matt, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2016, 791-798).

Postel is entirely convinced of the reality of the upcoming Restitution, and of the total accuracy of his prophetic claims, established as they are – or so he likes to think – by the reintegration of his intellect into its pre-lapsarian condition and the physical transformation he has been submitted to. One of the more obvious conclusions which must be drawn from this situation is that the next step in the historical development of Christianity – meaning, for Postel, the advent of the Restitution and the universal acceptance of his role as its herald – is therefore to be closely and concretely modelled on the zoharic themes he considers to be a truthful anticipation of the public revelation of the feminine messiah: the actual presence on Earth of the “Fourth Term” or “Created Wisdom”.<sup>28</sup> In other words, and according to him, the changing spiritual pattern of Christianity directly conforms to the paradigm of certain very peculiar Jewish-Kabbalistic doctrines, which provide not just the doctrinal canvas for the Restitution but the blueprint for its renovated spiritual lay-out and historical realization, as well.

Such an “internalized” understanding of Kabbalah suggests a complex relationship between Postel’s works and doctrine, on the one hand, and his own spiritual life, with its “prophetic” outward manifestations, on the other. If it is obvious that, in many respects, Postel shows a real capacity for Kabbalistic speculative creativity, as already claimed by Pico for Christians,<sup>29</sup> it is for reasons that are very different from those promoted by the Count of Mirandola. Above all, exteriorizing Jewish esotericism is a way, for our author, to publicize his own revelations and present them as part of a preordained divine plan. In so doing, the spiritual states supposedly attained by him (and Joanna) are reputed to find their later, public expression in actual historical developments, so that Kabbalah (and the *Zohar*) is indeed equated, in this sense, with prophecy, a bugbear that was to remain with him all his life and an important mainstay of Kabbalah (and of its Christian adaptations) in general, as is well-known.

### **A prophet goes public**

Postel waited in fact until 1553 (in Paris) and 1555 (in Padua) before he actually made public the name and revelation of the feminine messiah and

---

28 Guillaume Postel, *Des admirables secrets des nombres platoniciens (De admirandis numerorum platoniorum secretis*, Venice 1549), (De Pétrarque à Descartes 70), ed. and trans. Jean-Pierre Brach, Paris: Vrin 2001, 126-127 and n. 263.

29 S. A. Farmer (ed.), *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses...*, 518-521; Stéphane Toussaint, “Kabbalah and Concordia in Two of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Orphic Theses*”, *Academia* 12, 2010, 13-26.

of their joint mission.<sup>30</sup> The use, in both cases, of vernacular languages, reflects his obvious opinion that the time was now ripe to make his doctrines accessible to all and sundry.

However, in reality, Postel was not merely writing about himself, or bending authoritative texts towards the confirmation of his mission. What he was more or less deliberately attempting to do was in fact dual: 1) modelling his inner life on some of the mythical and symbolical patterns of the *Zohar* or the Bible, so that these structures were fully integrated into his psychic life and mystical outlook; 2) construing – conversely – his material existence as the outward projection and ultimate goal of such spiritual themes, thus linking them inseparably to his self-appointed mission. His life and doctrines are supposedly a mutual confirmation of each other, in close imitation (or so he liked to think) of Jesus-Christ. Also in purported imitation of Jesus-Christ is his imaginary building up of his own personal history as an integral part of the unfolding of the providential decrees (although, as we have seen, he never claimed himself to be the messiah or Jesus-Christ come again).

This leads us to a situation in which Postel is actually constructing himself as the embodiment of Christian tradition, which supposedly finds in him its ultimate justification. This makes him the sole witness to, and authority for, the new spiritual revelation he is trying to promote, through publication, from a private intuition to a universal message.<sup>31</sup> The hardships entailed by such a task could hardly be hidden from him, as we have suggested above.

But how “consciously illicit” was he, when he started going public about his and Joanna’s mission? The answer is of course somewhat difficult to elicit from our sources. That Postel had a strong natural propensity to wish-fulfilment and to reading his whim into reality is obvious from the start but certainly insufficient to explain everything.

As already noted, he was not above sporadic episodes of self-doubt and criticism, as when he admitted, before the Inquisition in 1555, that he had possibly yielded to a temptation he had already been warned against (by the Jesuits, in particular): that of overestimating himself and of harbouring an egoistic desire to play a public role above his social rank, capacities and status in society. On that same (and also several other) occasions, he went even as far as retracting some of his most daring opinions about Joanna’s

---

30 See the references mentioned respectively in notes 17 and 22 above.

31 Jean-François Maillard, “En quête d’un public: Les affres de Guillaume Postel”, in: Marie Thérèse Jones-Davies (ed.), *L’auteur et son public au temps de la Renaissance*, Paris: Klincksieck 1998; J.-P. Brach, “Spiritual Authority...”, 313-320.

and his mission, admitting that, in these matters, his enthusiastic feelings may have overridden or even exceeded his comprehension.<sup>32</sup>

It goes without saying that the spiritual emulation that is quite likely to have existed between him and Joanna must have exacerbated his (their?) tendency to think of themselves as two privileged vessels of divine election.

### **Deliberate wishful thinking?**

But there is more to it than meets the eye and, as stated by F. Secret, the ingenuity of Postel’s retractations can – and in some instances *must* – be doubted.<sup>33</sup> With all his undisputable mystical tendencies, he nevertheless exhibited a sense of political calculation and expediency, of which there are frequent examples in his life.

In Venice, for instance, during his second stay, he incurred reprobation from the State Council for some daring public proclamations in which he extolled the brilliant spiritual and political destiny of the City of Doges, should the local government take into account his admonitions!<sup>34</sup> In Paris, the publication of his 1553 booklet explicitly mentioning Joanna and their joint mission was quite clearly designed to try and win royal favour by aligning himself on the political and religious nationalism championed, at the time, by King Henry II.<sup>35</sup> It was also, by the way, part of an attempt to secure for himself a new academic position in Paris, akin to the one he had held some fifteen years before at the incipient Royal College and which he had voluntarily relinquished at the time.

Naturally, his contemporary antics of 1552, such as his *immutatio* and subsequent public claim to physical immortality, as well as some incautious predictions openly delivered in church during Lent of 1553, did not look well at the royal Court and even Postel himself was made aware that accusations of folly or unreason were actually levelled against him in the king’s entourage – to the point that he had to flee Paris quite suddenly, after Easter 1553, to avoid being arrested.<sup>36</sup> If, a few years later, he could again count himself lucky that a verdict of dementia was returned against him by the Venetian Inquisition in 1555 – thus eventually saving his life

32 G. Weill – F. Secret, *Vie et caractère...*, 112-117; J.-P. Brach, “Dieu fait femme...”, 57-58.

33 F. Secret (ed.), *Guillaume Postel: Apologies...*, 10; id. (ed.), *G. Postel: Le Thresor des Prophéties de l’Univers*, (International Archives of the History of Ideas 27), The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1969, 26-29.

34 G. Weill – F. Secret, *Vie et caractère...*, 72-73.

35 J. Dupêbe, “Poursuites contre Postel...”, 31-36.

36 *Ibid.*, 37.

–, it is equally obvious that he expected leniency, at first, from his judges, before he realized that pleading madness before the court (whose members were already convinced of his folly) would be his only way off the hook.

If Postel's mystical inclinations and religious sincerity cannot reasonably be doubted on the whole, neither can we ignore his uncanny talent for self-deception, nor his ability to manipulate others in order to try and promote himself and his personal spiritual certainties. At the same time, one cannot fail to observe his capacity to jeopardize issues and to inadvertently undermine his own interests by his untimely outbursts, like in Paris with his ill-advised admonishments to the royal court, or in Venice, when he spontaneously presented himself before the Inquisition with the declared intention of getting approval for the overall contents of his views and writings (which he perfectly well knew were under fire from Catholic doctrinal watchdogs).

In essence, Postel was no different from any other complicated human individual; thus, the answer to the question of whether he was or was not “consciously illicit” is entangled in an internal network of psychological contradictions. While certainly not immune to political opportunism or to the nurturing of an unrelenting tendency towards self-promotion, he was also and at the same time genuinely immersed in the pursuit of the *imitatio Christi* and ready to assume the dire consequences of his self-declared mission. His life certainly bears the stamp of his convictions and it cannot be said that he attempted in this respect to go easy on himself: even in the face of imprisonment, poverty and adversity, mockery or stern opposition to his views, he never seems to have placed manoeuvres or networking – or even the impact of his own, admittedly strong personal capacities – above confidence in the truthfulness of his revelations and in the divine sanction of Providence. Necessarily aware of the quandaries and hardships entailed by the task of obtaining recognition for his mission, it would appear that he reckoned that, scandal being inevitable, he would bear the brunt of it with the ultimate conviction that God's ways would inevitably triumph over any amount of opposition, since he had been chosen and singled out to pave the way for them.

If he sometimes chose intricate ways of overcoming both spiritual and material obstacles, and accordingly devised for himself an uncanny literary style and terminology to convey his (often ranting) doctrinal elaborations, by doing so he may also – unwillingly – have anticipated Steve Martin's famous line: “It's like those French have a different word for everything!”



## SUMMARY

**Illicit Christianity: Guillaume Postel, Kabbalah and a “Transgender” Messiah**

Like so many other individuals – particularly in his time –, the French Humanist G. Postel (1510-1581) felt convinced that he was invested with a prominent spiritual role to play. His 1546 chance-meeting in Venice with an elderly visionary woman, he interpreted as a providential confirmation of his mission, the more so as he rapidly came to identify her with the Christian messiah come again as a woman. Their common – and entirely self-appointed – task was to herald publicly the incoming Era of the “Restitution” of mankind, a last period of merciful leniency granted to mankind by the divine Providence before the end of time.

For this announcement to be made credible, Postel developed some complex theories about the feminine messiah, and about himself as being her and Jesus’ progeny, after having been submitted to a process of internal transmutation culminating in early 1552. Certain Kabbalistic speculations played an important part in shaping Postel’s outlook, and constituted the pattern against which he modelled the new version of Christianity he felt compelled to advertise. The present article attempts to give an analysis of his disclosures and examines the degree of awareness and (dis?)ingenuity Postel eventually manifested when confronted with the theological and political scandals resulting from his “revelations”.

**Keywords:** body; celestial; esotericism; feminine; immortality; immutation; inquisition; Kabbalah; messiah; Postel, Guillaume; prophecy; quaternary; Restitution; scandal; wisdom; *Zohar*.

École Pratique des Hautes Études  
The Sorbonne  
35 rue des Bergers  
75015 Paris  
France

JEAN-PIERRE BRACH

jpbrach@noos.fr