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## **Neoplatonic "Tree of Life" (Arbor Porphyriana: A diagram of logic and mystical theology)**

### **Abstract**

*In several versions of „Introduction to Aristotle's Categories“ („The Isagoge“) we find very intriguing diagram of the "Tree of Porphyry". This diagram is closely linked with the square of opposition (logical square), natural tree with vegetative ornaments and the anthropomorphic figure. Porphyry took over Aristotle's division into five predicables (quinque praedicabilia) and defined them through five classes (species, genus, differentia, propria, accidentia) and from them he created scala praedicamentalis (Arbor Porphyriana). The Neoplatonic-Aristotelianism of Porphyry influenced the return of interest in Aristotle's logic in the Middle Ages through translations of Boethius and Al-Farabi. Their works of logic were the basis for the study of many topics, especially those related to theology. Later diagrams with the natural tree and human figure (syndesmos) are found in the 13th century in "Tractatus" („Summulae Logicales“) written by Peter of Spain under different names such as: Tree of Love, Tree of Life, Tree of Science, Tree of Knowledge etc. Christian mysticism (Mystical theology), Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) was deeply influenced by Neoplatonic philosophy and within these mystical traditions we find different variations of the diagram aswell. Under the influence of the concept of Neoplatonic procession and reversion, mystic should be simultaneously involved in both Cataphatic and Apophatic theology to truly understand God. In other words, a spiritual person has to oscillate between affirming claims about the Tree of Life (the Being) and negation of those same claims to be able to have real knowledge of God.*

### **Keywords**

*Tree of Porphyry, The Isagoge, Summulae logicales, Tree of Life, Aristotle's logic, Neoplatonic-Aristotelianism, Boethius, Peter of Spain, Syndesmos, The Perfect Man, Adam Kadmon, Neoplatonic procession and reversion, Cataphatic and Apophatic theology.*

An „Introduction to Aristotle's Categories“ or „Isagoge“, the very interesting work of logic was written by the famous Neoplatonist Porphyry<sup>1</sup> who was a follower and biographer of Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. It seems that this work was created at the request of the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> The late ancient philosopher Porphyry was one of the founders of Neoplatonism. He edited the teachings of Plotinus into the form in which they are now known, clarified them with insights of his own and established them in the thought of his time. But, in reaction to Plotinus, he also advanced the cause of Aristotle's philosophical logic. Indeed, Porphyry is responsible for the resurgence of interest in Aristotle, which continued to the Middle Ages and beyond. Because of Porphyry, later Greek philosophy recovered both its Platonic and its Aristotelian roots, and Neoplatonism aimed to combine inspired thought with academic precision. He was a scholar of great learning, with interests ranging from literary criticism and history to religion. An example is his defence of vegetarianism and his attention to logic, metaphysics and all other topics was driven by his firm belief that reason exercised by pure mind leads to the true essence of things, the One God. Intellectual activity detaches the soul from passions and confusions, and concentrates its activity on the real things. Porphyry attacked Christianity and Gnosticism because he thought they appealed to the irrational. Mysteries and rituals are fitted for those who are unable to practise inward contemplation. Salvation comes to those leading the life of the philosopher-priest.

senator Chrysaoris who was a close Porphyry's friend.<sup>2</sup> In the „Introduction to Aristotle's Categories“ for the first time we find the diagram of the "Porphyrian Tree" or "Tree of Porphyry", although according to Porphyry's commentators such as Marius Victorinus (4th century) and Ammonius (5th century) the diagram is not called a tree, but it is associated with the square of opposition (logical square) and later with anthropomorphic (syndesmos) figure.<sup>3</sup>

Porphyry insisted that the works of Aristotle should be included in the Neoplatonistic curriculum, especially those related to logic.<sup>4</sup> This was provoked by the need that Plato's view of the world as one that is primarily concerned with the spiritual "Real (Upper) world", to be confirmed and explained by Aristotelian logic in the Lower world. Plato's metaphysics (theology) therefore extends to the natural sciences, such as logic in the early Middle Ages. After Porphyry, Aristotle's works had an important part in demonstrating and validating Platonistic truths.<sup>5</sup> So for the medieval Neoplatonists it's not only the immaterial Upper world of great importance, but also it's reflection in the material world below. where we live.



*In the picture above we can see how Plato is showing that intelligible Forms are located above physical world, in the Upper Realm. However, on the other side Aristotle is pointing that Forms are in the nature around us. The philosopher Porphyry sought to reconcile these positions thus creating a so-called. Neoplatonistic-Aristotelianism, the backbone and foundation of medieval mysticism.*

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<sup>2</sup> **Annemieke Rosalinde**, *Lines of thought: diagrammatic representation and the scientific texts of the Arts Faculty, 1200-1500*, Doctoral thesis at Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> **I.M. Bochenski**, *A history of formal logic*, Notre Dame, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> **Henry Chadwick**, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology and Philosophy*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> **Ibid.**

Platonic tradition equated logic and dialectic, believing that there are no large deviations between them. The dialectic (logic) is studied in medieval universities as part of the so-called trivium (rhetoric, grammar, dialectic/logic). The first medieval philosopher in the West with a big interest in the dialectic was a Christian Neoplatonist Boethius.

Boethius as one of the last philosophers of the Western Roman Empire, and as a man of great insight in Greek philosophy, was considered one of the last major mediators of the ancient knowledge to the Latin West. His original idea was to re-educate medieval West by translating all of Plato's and Aristotle's works, and also to write his comments on these works. However, this proved to be too ambitious undertaking, and Boethius limited mainly to the field of translation of logical works like Aristotle's "Organon" and especially the work titled "Introduction to Aristotle's Categories" ("Isagoge") which represented one of the standard works of logic studied in Neoplatonic schools.

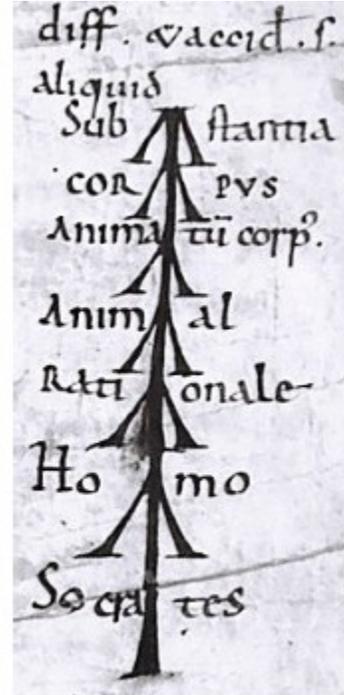
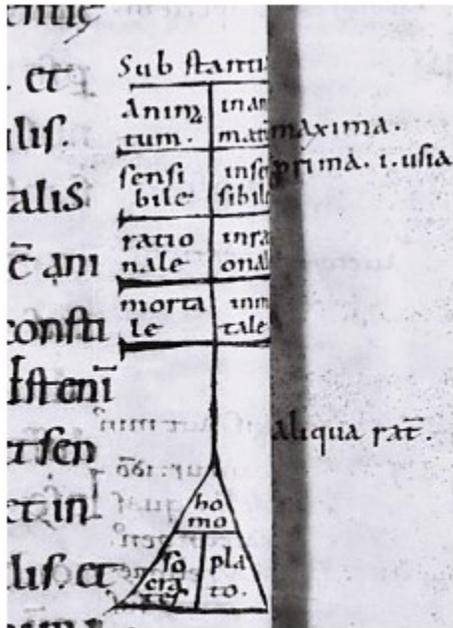
These works of logic were the foundation for the study of many topics, especially those related to theology. In other words, these works not only had a primary role in the study of the basic logic of the Middle Ages, but they also had significant role in theological debates. Therefore, it is no wonder why according to sources many theologians of the Middle Ages knew more about Boethius, than the apostles.<sup>6</sup> So the earliest occurrence of Aristotle in the texts of the Middle Ages are the ones that speak of the theological debates related to logic of Aristotle (Ten Categories) but in the wider context of the Neoplatonic metaphysics. Boethius was also influenced by Augustine who claimed that theologians must not ignore the importance of logic. For Boethius intense theological debates between Rome and Constantinople could be overcome by the effort of experienced logicians, so he wrote four theological treatise on the nature of the Trinity and the person of Christ from the standpoint of Aristotle's logic. After Boethius in the period from 7-11 century in the Latin West and the Greek East there was no significant circulation of Aristotle logic, or works of philosophy in general. So the "Introduction to Aristotle's Categories" ("Isagoge ") has been translated in 8th century by Ibn-al-Arab Muqaffa under the name "Isaghuji" which has been the standard text on logic in the Islamic world and had strong impact on the Islamic study of theology, philosophy and grammar. Works on logic written by Islamic Neoplatonist Al-Farabi in the 11th century most probably had a role in maintaining of logic in the 11-13 century, leading to the possibility that the Neoplatonic works written in Latin in this period actually were translations of Arabic texts from Islamic Neoplatonists.<sup>7</sup> Al-Farabi was particularly responsible for the distribution of Aristotle's logic within Islamic culture paraphrasing works like the "Organon", "Rhetoric", "Poetics" and especially "Isagoge". On the basis of works of Porphyry like "On identical opinions of Plato and Aristotle", Al-Farabi fostered the "reconciliation" of Plato and Aristotle, considering that both are essentially talking about the same things in the context of so-called. Neoplatonic-Aristotelism.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, we can conclude that Boethius and Al-Farabi wanted to explain and

<sup>6</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>7</sup> **Majid Fakhry**, *Al-Farabi: Founder of Islamic Neoplatonism; His Life, Works and Influence*, Oxford 2002.

<sup>8</sup> **Ibid.**

confirm compatibility between Aristotle's logic (dialectics) and Platonic metaphysics by introducing the "Tree of Porphyry" diagram.<sup>9</sup> It is known that the Spanish translator Gundisalvus (Domingo Gundisalvo) translated the "Introduction to Aristotle's Categories" ("Isagoge") from Arabic into Latin, and it is probably because of him we have the existence of numerous examples of „Tree of Porphyry“ diagram in the manuscripts of the 12th century. Later samples of the diagram represented by natural tree we find in the 13th century work titled "Tractatus" (Sumulae Logicales) by Peter of Spain which represented an important medieval textbook of Aristotelian logic.<sup>10</sup>



Picture 1: Boethius, *Isagoge, translatio*. Cologne, Dombibliothek, Slika 1: ms. 191, f.10v; Picture 2: ms. 191, f. 2v.; Picture 3: ms. 191, f. 4r. (11<sup>th</sup> century)

<sup>9</sup> Rosalinde, *Lines of thought*

<sup>10</sup> Around 400 copies of the "Tractatus" survived to this day. The half of these contains drawings of the "Tree of Porphyry". These copies were spread throughout Europe and usually were located in universities or monasteries. Most copies dates from the 14th century.



explanation and understanding of basic terms and their functions. Logic leads us from one truth to another, and the language is used as a tool for expression of these truths.<sup>12</sup> As such, the logic was used as a base for all the other sciences including theology, so many scholars of medieval Europe knew „Tree“ diagram and its theory by heart.<sup>13</sup> In particular, here we should focus on the so-called. *logica modernorum* in the 13th century, which was created as a combination of the *logica vetus* (old logic), which dates from the early Middle Ages and the *logica nova* that comes in the 14th century.<sup>14</sup> The classical example of the *logicae modernorum* is the "Tractatus" (Sumulae Logicales) created by Peter of Spain in the early 13th century.<sup>15</sup> The tree is particularly considered to be an ideal metaphor for expressing hierarchy and connectivity. The organic structure of the trunk, branches and leaves served in systematization of content according to hierarchical patterns from large to small. In general, the "Tree" indicates an overall master concept in which there are a lot of small specific concepts within it.<sup>16</sup> From the second half of the 13th century "Tree of Porphyry" receives new applications in many other disciplines and accordingly we find the use of many different names for it such as: Tree of Love, Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge, Tree of Wisdom etc.<sup>17</sup> We can even say that this form of tree imagination has become a kind of obsession for people in 12th and 13th century. Arborization was very important rhetorical instrument in the hands of all those who were engaged in the work of spirituality. The tree imagination also was an important argument to those who have practiced craft of preaching (artes praedicanti).<sup>18</sup> So it was common that the terms preaching and arborisation were equated: "praedicare est arborisare".<sup>19</sup> Sermon is structured like a tree, where the introduction is similar to a trunk which connects branches with the roots. The 15th century preacher Mauritius from Leiden further explains that the parts of the sermon are like branches

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<sup>12</sup> Ashworth, *Language and Logic*

<sup>13</sup> Rosalinde, *Lines of thought*

<sup>14</sup> *The Medieval Tree of Porphyry: An Organic Structure of Logic*, in: A. Worm and P. Salonis (eds.), *The Tree. Symbol, Allegory and Structural Device in Medieval Art and Thought*, International Medieval Research, 20. Turnhout (Brepols: 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Peter of Spain as a young man came at the University of Paris around 1220. After the turmoil caused by the conflict between the members of the University and the city authorities, many students and teachers went to other known universities of the time such as Cambridge and Oxford. Peter of Spain himself went to Leon in Spain where he taught logic and where he wrote "Tractatus". Some researchers suggested that the work was created for students in the famous Spanish university center of Salamanca, while some others believe that the "Tractatus" was created for the purpose of teaching children of Spanish elite in the courts of Castile and Leon.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the earliest copies of the diagram from 9-12 century did not have the shape of a tree with a trunk, branches and leaves, but this version of the diagram with vegetative ornaments actually appeared in the 13th century. One of remarkable copies with the diagram is found in the possession of Gerard de Abbeville (1225-72), who had left it to his students at the Sorbonne, where it is still today. Another nice example of the „Tree“ is found in London and it also shows the roots, trunk and probably the fruit. A few more drawings of the "Tree of Porphyry" can be found in Rome, Vienna, Pavia, Graz and Munich. (Bib.Casanatense, MS 806, fol.3, Austrian National Library. Cod.2389, fol.10; Bib.Univ., MS Aldini 450, fol.89; Universitätsbibliothek, MS 1039, fol.166, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 7658, fol.203.)

<sup>17</sup> Rosalinde, *Lines of thought*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Johann Ulrich Surgant, *Manuale curatorum; Kamber, Arbor amoris. Dr Minnebaum*, Basel 1956.

"on which the fruits of salvation hangs".<sup>20</sup> From the above it can be concluded that the mental image of the tree was an important part of catechesis and religious education in the medieval times.

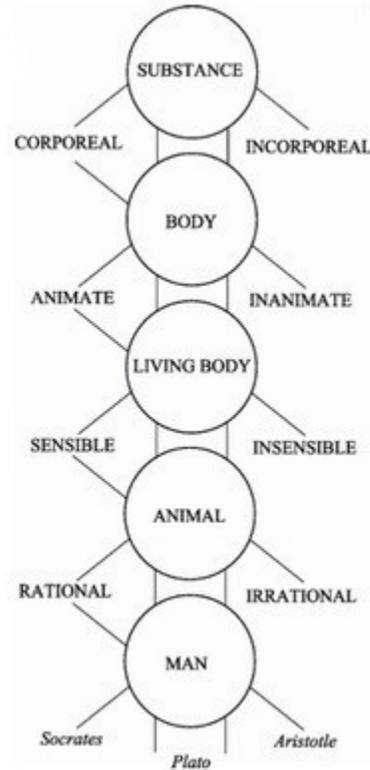
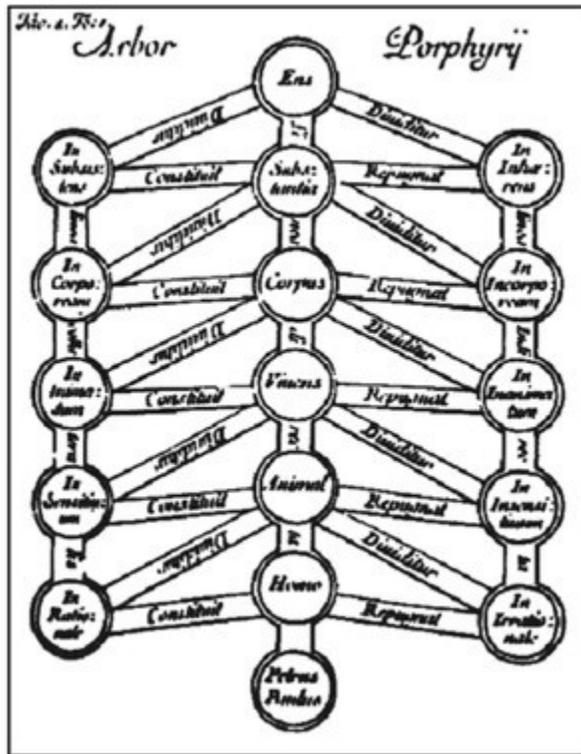
The "Tractatus" (Sumulae Logicales) by Peter of Spain was an ideal guide for those who are beginners in Aristotle's logic. Porphyry took over Aristotle's division into five predicables (quinque praedicabilia) and defined them through five classes or five ways that we can talk about anything (species, genus, differentia, propria, accidentia) and from them he created scala praedicamentalis or "Tree of Porphyry" (Arbor Porphyriana). In its most basic form, a diagram of the „Tree“ is made of the terms within the three columns that are interconnected with lines.<sup>21</sup> The highest term is "substance" (substantia; essence)<sup>22</sup> which is divided into "physical/material" (corporalis) and "non-physical/immaterial" (incorporalis) substances. "Corporalis substance" includes genus "organic body" (animatum corpus) which refers to animals and plants. Now, the "organic body" is genus of "living organic bodies subjected to perception or senses" („animal sensible“) and here for example we talk about animals, but not the plants. Next, the "living organic body subjected to the senses" is the genus of "rational animated body" ("animal rationale") such as people, but not the animals. "Rational animated body" form genus of "mortal and immortal animated body", so finally the "mortal animated body" emerged from "rational animated body" leads to generation of man (homo). Thus man which consists of individuals like Plato or Socrates for example, becomes most specific species on the diagram of the „Tree“. From all this we can conclude that the central column refers to those species that are related to genus of the following subordinate row or series. The columns to the left and right refer to specific species within the genus of the higher species. It is interesting that the terms on the "Tree" are differentiating only in the right (Platonic definite dyad), but not in the left column (Platonic indefinite dyad). The other member of the pair is therefore always a negation of the first. In other words, there are a deliberate contradictory differences that are highlighted on the „Tree“.

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<sup>20</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>21</sup> **Rosalinde**, *Lines of thought*

<sup>22</sup> The substance is only one of the ten Aristotle's categories. Yet substance is different from all the other categories and it is ranked highest because it defines the fundamental and first mode of existence. So for logic the basic task is to study the "essence" of things or beings.



Picture 1: „Tree of Porphyry“ (15th century)<sup>23</sup>

Picture 2: Schematic „Tree of Porphyry“ with english terms

Regarding its structure, the "Tree" was organized from top to bottom. Therefore, the general concept of "essence" is located at the very top, while specific concepts of multiplicity related to the individuality of human beings are at the very bottom. Here we have a state of Platonic inversion (anatrope), where the "Tree" is actually inverted, and according to Timaeus, the human intellect is identified with a plant that has roots in the higher regions of Heaven. The metaphor of the inverted „Tree“ was known within the three monotheistic religions where it symbolized the growing knowledge of God presented as ascent to the roots of the Above.<sup>24</sup> This conflict is expressed in the direction of expanding or growth, so this is the characteristic which separates the Platonic „Tree“ from the natural tree. Medieval authors sought to resolve this conflict by making a drawing of the „Tree“ that "naturally" goes and spreads upward, but at the same time they stick with the Platonic concept that the „Tree“ is organized from top to bottom.<sup>25</sup> The best example of this can be found in the drawing inside the manuscript kept in Wolfenbüttel. At that copy of "Tractatus" from the 15th century we can clearly see figure of the "Tree" with roots and

<sup>23</sup> In: **Edmond Pourchot**, *Institutiones philosophicae ad faciliorem veterum et recentiorum philosophorum intelligentiam comparatae* (Leiden: Antonius Boudier, 1711), Paris, Bibliotheque nationale de France, Res.47782

<sup>24</sup> **Rosalinde**, *Lines of thought*

<sup>25</sup> **Ibid.**



### **"Neoplatonic Tree" in the form of anthropomorphic figure (syndesmos)**

"Tree of Porphyry" drawn in the "Tractatus" is often designed in the form of a human figure standing behind the diagram, holding, or showing it in some way. This figure we often find in Peter's "Tractatus", and in some of the copies of the manuscript this anthropomorphic figure also has a crown, and often there is a fusion of the human body with the figure, where only a human head, arms and legs could be seen.<sup>26</sup> In the figures below we can see a man wearing a crown. He is connected or fused with the structure of the "Tree" alluding to the idea of interconnectivity (syndesmos-greek term for conjunction) of human beings with the "substance", or Platonic first principle (The One, God). Syndesmos anthropomorphic motive was widespread in many diagrams with the different uses: genealogy, explaining the four elements and the four winds, Mappa Mundi, or it was a diagram which dealt with the relationship of macro and the micro world.

The names of Aristotle and Porphyry are often inscribed in syndesmos figure and in some cases on top of the figure there is a crown. It is very likely that the Arabic translations of Platonic texts in Spain (later translated to Latin) strongly influenced the emergence of the "Tree" and syndesmos figure in the West. Syndesmos anthropomorphic figures from the 13th century are found to be mostly correlated with the description of macro and micro world. As such they are probably closely related to the "Perfect Man" (Al-Insān al-Kāmil) found in Islamic Neoplatonism and with diagram of "Adam Kadmon" which is found in Jewish Kabbalist tradition, the known mysticism based on the Neoplatonic philosophy as well, under the strong influence of Arabic translations also.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Graz, Universitätsbibliothek, cod. 1039, f. 166v, Assisi, Biblioteca Comunale, cod. 293, f. 25; Vienne, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cyp 5248, f. 5v; *ibid.*, 2389, f. 0v.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Farabi's thoughts on Active Intellect will have a big influence on medieval Jewish philosophy. Ibn Sina made an even stronger impact on the medieval Jewish philosophers like Hallevi, Ibn Daud and Maimon. It seems that Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina indirectly influenced the emergence of theosophical doctrine known as Kabbalah. (**Herbert A. Davidson**, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect; Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect and Theories of Human Intellect*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1992).



Picture 1: Peter of Spain, "Tractatus", Córdoba, Biblioteca del Cabildo, ms. 158, f. 33r. (13<sup>th</sup> century)  
 Picture 2: Peter of Spain, "Tractatus", Bryn Mawr, Bryn Mawr Library, ms. Gordan 92, f. 6v. (15<sup>th</sup> century)

If we bear in mind that the most famous medieval mystical spiritual communities, including the Christian mysticism ("Mystical theology"); Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), more or less were created in the spirit of Neoplatonic philosophy, then we can more easily understand why throughout the medieval world the examples of anthropomorphic figures could be found precisely inside these traditions. The "Perfect Man" and "Adam Kadmon" are diagrams representing Neoplatonic idea of merging or conjunction with the Active Intellect, which will have a major impact on medieval philosophy and mysticism.<sup>28</sup> The concept of conjunction (ittisal) occupies an extremely important place in the philosophical system of Islamic Neoplatonists (Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn-Sina). In the early Arab philosophy, Al-Kindi refers to Porphyry in his conviction that the Active Intellect as a transcendental source is directly connected to the human intellect. Islamic Neoplatonists confirmed the possibility that the human intellect could enter the state of "happiness" through a conjunction with the Active Intellect. The "Perfect Man" (al-insan al-kamil) is an example of the conjunction or fusion with the divine. This is a concept which is mostly associated with Islamic Neoplatonist and Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi who was born in Spain. In the cosmological and cosmogonical context the "Perfect Man" is the

<sup>28</sup> Divine Intellect reflects one single overall "body of knowledge" that is interwoven within itself in such a way that each part of the "body" is closely linked with other parts. The Active Intellect also represents God's self-contemplation that results in the formation of a total of ten intellects. The last tenth intellect (the material world) is directly connected with the Active Intellect and this relationship reflects a continuous play between the process of creation or Neoplatonic procession and the return of the soul or Neoplatonic reversion. Both processes are found in the Agent Intellect in united and undivided state. For Ibn-Sina, this is of great religious significance, believing that the human mind is directly connected and open to the Active Intellect. In Islamic religious context Agent Intellect is identified with Djibril (Gabriel), and in the Christian Neoplatonism with Logos. (**Encyclopedia Of Philosophy**, Routledge, 1998).

prototype of the ongoing process of creation because it contains all the archetypes in its essence, so it's most easily grasped as "Tree of Being" which has roots (the essence) in the sky (Upper world / the head) while the trunk, branches and fruit are in the universe (Lower world / the body). Ibn Arabi discusses and describes several different cosmological schemes by describing different aspects of cosmic reality. The figure wearing a crown is showing the connection between the head and the body (roots and branches) reflecting the state of conjunction of the natural man and the "Perfect Man". Various aspects of the "Perfect Man" are discussed in almost all the works of Ibn Arabi such as; "Fusus al-Hikma" (The Ringstones of Wisdom) and "Shajarat al-kawn" (Tree of Being). What is interesting is that the author believes that potentially every man can attain conjunction with the "Perfect man", while in reality only the prophets and saints can achieve that privileged status.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the author looks at the structure of the universe as a tree whose branches symbolize various degrees of cosmic existence within cataphatic theology. According to Ibn Arabi our existence belongs to God from the beginning. We are not separated from God and this relationship is reflected in the belief that God is present in man, and that man is "immersed" in God. So God "sees" through the eyes of a man and "hears" through his ears, while the man is "immersed" in God, so that he in God "hears" and "sees" also. Ibn Arabi confirms this by the following hadith: "When I love him, then I shall be his ears with which he listens, his eyes with which he sees, his tongue with which he speaks, and his hands with which he holds; if he calls Me, I shall answer him, and if he asks Me, I shall give him." In the state of the union or conjunction, the individuality of man is illuminated and becomes immersed in the divine light.

According to Kabbalistic tradition of Jewish mysticism, the best way to understand God is to understand the human being, so we can say that the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm. „Tree of Life“ is the image of creation, the diagram representing the principles of the entire universe located between two poles: Nothingness/Ayn Soph (potential) and All/Ten Sephiroth (manifestation). The universe as being is a manifestation of creation, the gradual unwinding of divine impulse from seed to fruit. After the fruit rots and dies, this cycle of manifestation is completed and we have the reverse of this process toward the potential of the new creation.<sup>30</sup> One of the essential ideas presented on the "Tree of Life" is the principle of polarity which is based on the premise that everything in the universe can be understood through the interrelationship of energies of the left and right sides of the „Tree“. In this polarity system one of these forces is centripetal (right side of the macrocosmic body) binding things together toward the center, while the other force is centrifugal (left side of the macrocosmic body) which pushes things away from one another.<sup>31</sup> Between these two polarities, there is a third force of harmony or equilibrium. Each of these three forces are of great importance on the "Tree of Life". Ten spheres are positioned within three vertical columns or pillars on the "Tree of Life", which correspond to

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<sup>29</sup> **Hossein Nasr**, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardi, Ibn Arabi* (1964).

<sup>30</sup> **Z'Ev Ben Shimon Halevi**, *Introduction to the Cabala: Tree of Life*, 1991.

<sup>31</sup> **John Michael Greer**, *Paths of Wisdom: Principles and Practice of the Magical Cabala in the Western Tradition*, 1996.

three stages in the process of polarization, including the related parts of macrocosmic body aswell. "Pillar of Mercy" contains spheres (Sephiroth): Chokhmah, Chesed and Netzach, "Pillar of Severity" contains spheres: Binah, Gevurah and Hod. Pillar in the middle is called by different names such as "The central pillar" or "Pillar of Harmony" and has a role of balancing the left and right pillars through the spheres of Kether, Tiphareth, Yesod and Malkuth. Symbolically this column represents a union of male and female nature in the act of creation.<sup>32</sup> The right side of the macrocosmic body (the right side of the head, right arm, right leg) has the role of "Mercy" or the quality of giving life. It refers to the manifestation in the material world Below and alludes to the female nature of the macrocosmic body. However, the left side of the macrocosmic body (left side of the head, left arm, left leg) is the "Severity" that mediates the rejection of the material manifestation below and it is turned toward the hidden spiritual potential of the "real world" Above. It is referring to the male nature and the central part of the macrocosmic body (crown, trunk, genitals). Its role is to harmonize the left and right sides, and to make body to be functional and perfectly balanced. Each of the ten spheres (Sephiroth) are not static but dynamic acting together in different ways and causing different results. Each of the Sephiroth is linked to a particular word in the Bible, so that the very reading of the sacred text results in divine self-revelation.<sup>33</sup> For example, when we read words like Crown, Mercy or Severity in the Bible, they actually reveal a mystical dimension of the sacred text that refers to divine emanations.<sup>34</sup> Sephiroths are actually keywords essential for understanding the sacred text. They help the reader to understand the reality through allegory and not to comprehend Bible literally.

According to Kabbalistic tradition humans are created in the image of God, so the Sephiroth are also reflected in the microcosmic human body. For it to function properly, our task is to realize the perfect harmony and the true relationship between the Mercy and Judgment, or Power and Compassion for example. In other words, man is a meeting point of heaven and earth, and it is a reflection of God because man was created in the image of God. The man is a "Tree" in miniature, so just as imbalance of Sephiroth in the macrocosmic body can cause trouble and chaos on the macro level, the imbalance in the human body can cause problems at the micro level also.<sup>35</sup> Here is an important Kabbalistic practice known under the name of "tikkun ha olam" (repairing of the world) where as a result of the correct understanding of God's mystery through the sacred text, each individual believer actually "corrects" the world in response to a "real" needs and demands of the time with a help of authorized leadership of the mystical community.<sup>36</sup> In short, the study of the sacred text symbolically as the manifested body of God enables mystical relationship with God to proceed (devequt), but at the same time it is achieved through active participation of the mystic by his effort of "repairing" the cosmos. In other words the mysticism is not an individual effort that applies only to the member of mystical community, but it's a real cosmic mission. So if an individual believer obeys God's command revealed in the

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<sup>32</sup> **Ibid.**

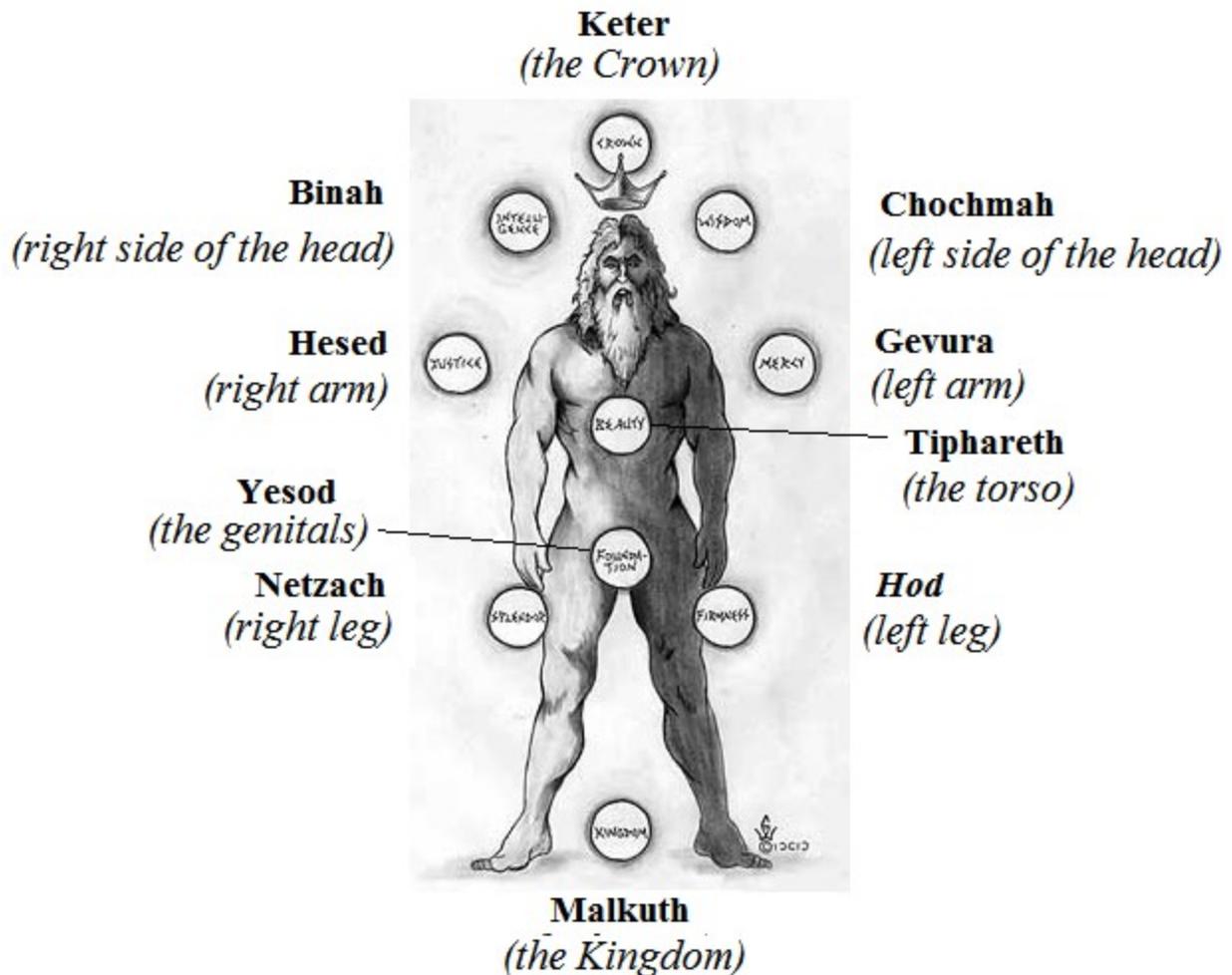
<sup>33</sup> **Luke Timothy Johnson**, *Mystical Tradition: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, TTC.

<sup>34</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>35</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>36</sup> **Ibid.**

sacred text, that has a beneficial effect on the entire universe, and not only on himself. Macrocosmos or cosmos around us and a microcosmos or the individual human being, reflects the symbolic significance of the "Tree of Life" which is simultaneously map of the universe, but also a diagram of the human soul. Therefore, "Tree of Life" can be seen as an image of the body of the universe, but also as an image of the individual human body. So "Adam Kadmon" in the Jewish Neoplatonism and "Perfect Man" in the Islamic Neoplatonism represent an archetype of the human being, or the universe conceived as an individual man projected into the cosmos. The implication of this idea lies in the belief that any kind of experience and consciousness in the universe, is reflected in the human being, and vice versa, that every experience and awareness of the human being is reflected in the universe.<sup>37</sup>



*Kabbala anthropomorphic Tree of Life (13th century)*

<sup>37</sup> Greer, *Paths of Wisdom*

### **The diagram of Neoplatonic ontology (procession and reversion) and mystical (cataphatic and apophatic) theology**

Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius combined Bible and Neoplatonic philosophy. As a result the emergence of mystical theology took place, heavily influenced by the teachings of Proclus.<sup>38</sup> In the late Middle Ages, works of Pseudo-Dionysius were translated from Greek into Latin, which has resulted in spreading of mysticism in Western Europe.<sup>39</sup> According to Pseudo-Dionysius (Proclus), God can be known in two ways. First way, regarding the creation of God which emanates from Himself, is about learning more about Him through images, symbols, names, relationships and logic of created things. Therefore we understand God better through names such as King, Father, Good Shepherd, Beauty, One, Crown, Grace, and through the images around us such as trees, rocks, light, etc. This kind of theology that reflects the process of Neoplatonic procession or creation is called Cataphatic theology.<sup>40</sup> It reflects the descending of God through the act of creation, giving us the possibility that we may know Him through the names (logical terms) and the images He created. Therefore, according to Cataphatic theology, which is also called "theology of affirmation" we make claims about God based on what we see around us, which increases our understanding of Him.<sup>41</sup> Affirmation of all creation, including the

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<sup>38</sup> When we talk about re-emergence of Neoplatonic texts in the 11th century, big role in this process had an author whose works have become the main mediators of Neoplatonism of Proclus in the form of Christian Neoplatonism. His name is known as Pseudo-Dionysius in the East and Denis in the West and "his" works (Corpus Dionysianum) had the status of the highest theological authority among Christians in the East and West for centuries. Christians believed that texts are originating from the time of the early church and that Dionysius was the first convert of St. Paul. However, in the 19th century it was discovered that the text is the copy of the Neoplatonic work of Proclus in christianized form written by an unknown author. Pseudo-Dionysius is known for the following works: "*On the Divine Names*", "*Symbolic Theology*", "*Mystical Theology*" and "*On the Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*". It is important that these works are filled with philosophical concepts of Neoplatonism and dominated by mysticism and theurgy.

<sup>39</sup> **Johnson**, *Mystical Tradition*

<sup>40</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>41</sup> **Ibid.**

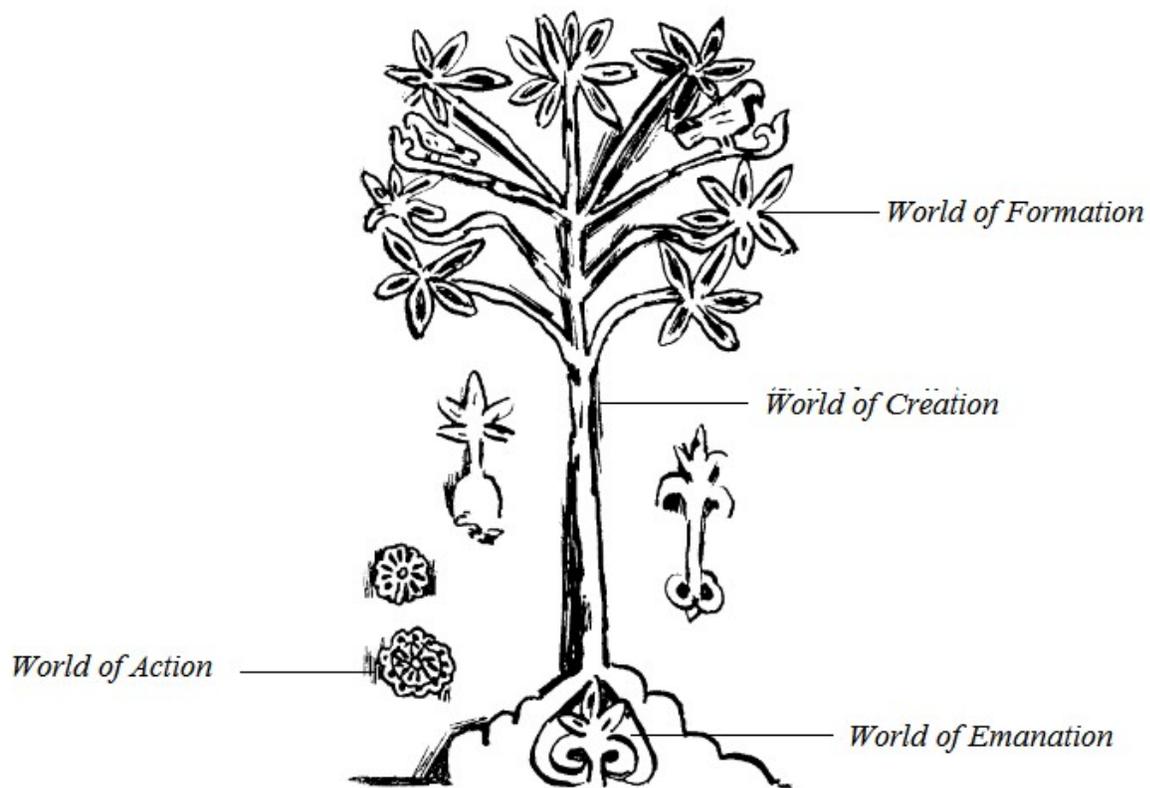
logic and relationship between the created things, the mystic actively participate in the realization of the divine, although knowing that God himself is outside of all creation. Theologically, making the Tree of Life diagrams and number of symbols on it reflects the process of creation, indicating that there is theology of affirmation or Cataphatic theology at work.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, a diagram of the Tree of Life affirms the entire process of creation through the four ontological layers or Platonic worlds by descending of the "divine light" downwards.

From the first emanation or Platonic world (the root of the Tree of Life), we can start talking about the beginning or foundation of Being or "existence". This generation of a being takes place through emanations from the state of complete Goodness toward the gradual states of incomplete Goodness below. Emanation is a process that is a result of nature of the One. It "overflows" downward like an eternal fountain or sunbeam, so the One does not create in a traditional sense based on some individual decision, but it emanates in accordance with its nature which is impersonal. The World of Emanation belongs exclusively to the Upper world and is fully divine in a state of complete unity. This world is based on non-differentiation and represents wholeness where all multiplicity is only in potential. Here we can talk about the beginning of a new concept of internalization of being. Now we have appearance of the certain internal structure of the world as we know it. This world is good to imagine as a root that is firmly connected to the rest of the Tree. Divine Intellect or "real world" emanates the hypostatized soul, especially its most important upper "part" which combines Forms in individual form and has a role to "create" the individual souls below. This creation is still in the conceptual phase and is far from the physical creation. This is related to the emergence of the Platonic World of Creation (the trunk of the Tree). This is a huge step down from the World of Emanation and now we can clearly say that the Upper world emanated the Lower world. Also this world is closely connected with the Platonic idea of unlimited expansion (peras) and according to the Judeo-Christian Neoplatonism this world is presided by the archangels. Unlike the World of Creation which refers to one supreme and complete idea of creation, the world below refers to a specific "formation" of a being, but not yet in its final materialistic form, but more like the design or blueprint of the creation yet to come. Therefore Platonic World of Formation (branches on the Tree of Life), should not be confused with the World of Action which is under the influence of matter, because it is still merely spiritual. In contrast to the World of Creation where the archangels have the main role, according to the Judeo-Christian Neoplatonism the World of Formation is managed by the angels who are subordinated to the archangels, and who have the task to design or create a world based on their "drafts". On Tree of Life the World of Formation is represented by the branches. As the main formative characteristics of the Tree, the branches come "out" from the Tree and move towards the full manifestation of the Tree in the material world. Finally, the fourth Platonic World of Action (the fruit of the Tree of Life) involves materialization of being that we perceive with our physical senses. World of Action contains a certain contradiction which is based on the idea that the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

transcendental God is the ultimate cause and the source of all existence in the material world, but at the same time He is "hidden", so that all created things are not really conscious of their Creator. This world is the ultimate purpose of all creation and it is the ultimate manifestation of absolute potential of the One. This forms an extremely important link between the One (the seed) Above and the material world of action (the fruit) Below. The value of the material world is reflected in the complete manifestation of God's potential through the existence of a diverse multitude of beings and things on earth., thus having a direct relationship between the Creator and the created. However, the gap between the created beings and their Creator is obvious and it causes the "emptiness" which demands to be satisfied or filled through unification with the Creator. This feeling of unfulfillment is "forcing" the human beings to make their life more "perfected" and closer to the divine. This driving force reminds us that we are material beings only temporary and that our "real" being is essentially spiritual. Because of this "external" nature of the World of Action, often the Neoplatonists use the term of the shell that "wrapped" the valuable inner parts of the fruit. So the world of matter is often compared with fruit which is the ultimate manifested part of the Tree of Life



*Motif on the Tree of Life (the Bosnian medieval tombstone-stećak)*

However for Pseudo-Dionysius there is another way how to talk about God by reflecting the Neoplatonic idea that God is beyond all images and concepts. According to this idea the God is

above the "Tree" or Being, even though without Him the Tree of Life and whole existence couldn't exist at all (symbolism of the seed). This kind of theology is called Apophatic theology or "theology of negation" because it does not relate to what we see around us, pointing out that God is not what we see, but is more or above being.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the affirmation of the process of creation is not enough because this aspect relates solely to the manifestation of the "parts" and suggests disunity and unlimited expansion downwards. Care must be taken to the "real" aspect that defines immaterial spiritual world reflected in the perfectly simple state of unity facing upwards. Theology of negation or Apophatic theology is based on the Neoplatonic reversion, suggesting that God is not all what we see around us in nature (logic of the "parts"), but that God is above all those things (oneness) and that His true nature is in the potential of creating, rather than in its expression. In other words, to affirm God through the manifested logic of "parts" is to reflect the creative aspect of God's nature in the Lower world. However, through the negation of multiplicity and concentrating on the simple and unifying aspect of God, we have a "turning" of the soul upwards to the Upper world, where it comes back and rises to God. The knowledge that God is more than the manifested Tree of Life (Being) is helping the individual soul to rise to the unmanifested source of potential through ontological layers of the Tree from the bottom to the top.

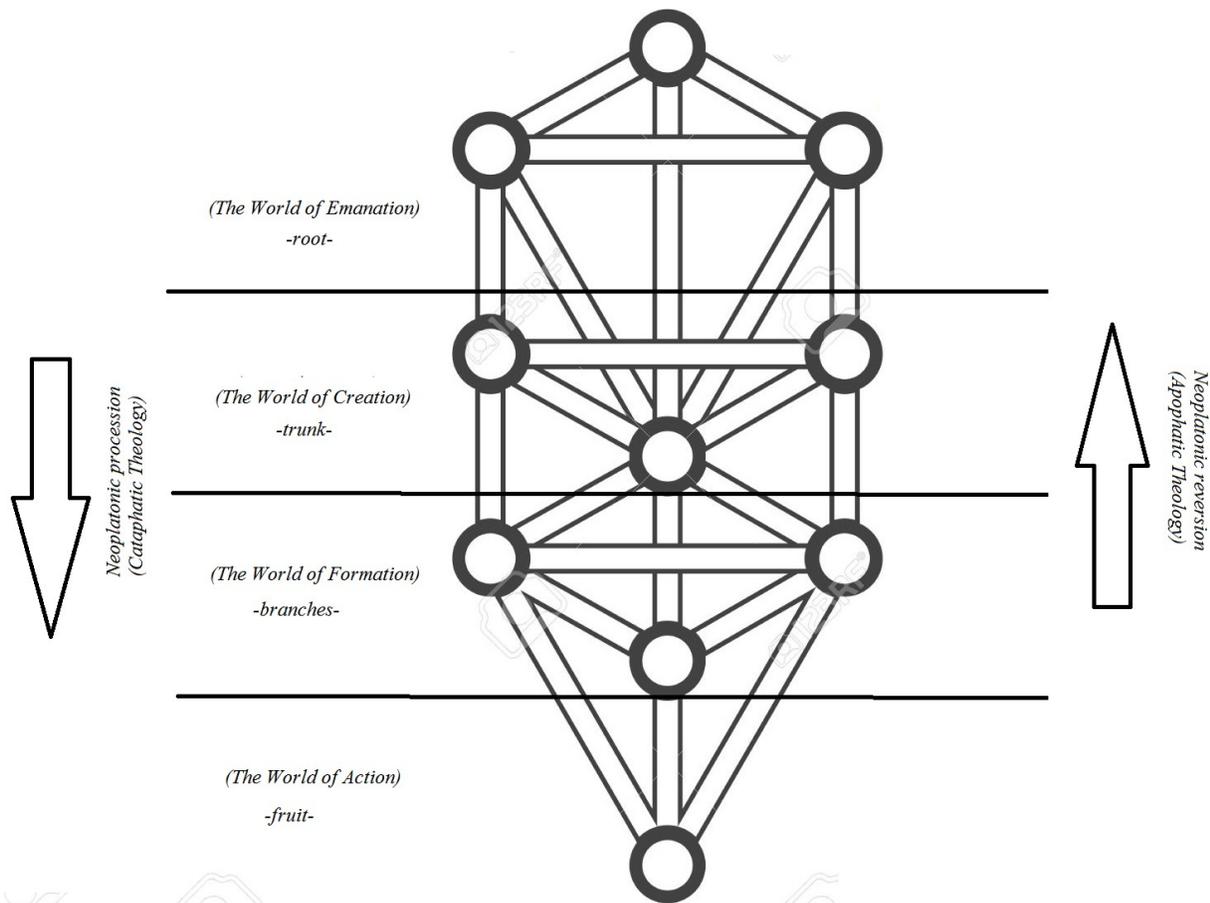
When we talk about Apophatic theology and the ascending the Tree of Life, it is useful to imagine all the Platonic worlds as integral parts of four-storey house. The first world whom we meet is the material world, which is metaphorically located on the first floor and there we can see the various sections of manifested created things in their full diversity and multiplicity. Let's say that one of the many sections or "rooms" on the "first floor" is full of chairs of various types, shapes, sizes and colors. These chairs can be seen, measured, felt and we can sit on them, so they represent something that is well known to us. However, sooner or later we can ask ourselves from where the chairs come from. or more precisely who made the design and form of a variety of different chairs? After the „first floor“, which refers to the material world, we go to the „second floor“ which is relatively unknown to us because all things there are immaterial. There are angelic beings working and designing on various forms of the things we have seen on the first floor. Here are developed numerous blueprints and ideas of things that need to be "made" in the material world, including the chairs that we talked about earlier. Angels on the „second floor“, which refers to the World of Formation are some sort of "engineers" that make an ideological solutions to things below on the first floor. However, angels are only "employees" who work under the archangels from the „third floor“ or the World of Creation where the original concept or idea of making a "chair" was created. Therefore, the angels on the "second floor" did not come up with an idea or concept of creating chairs, it came from the archangels above. World of Creation controls and manages the World of Formation and has a role to pass the "command" downwards. Finally when we get to the „fourth floor“ which represents the World of Emanation we do not see anything from the blinding light that shines with great

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

intensity. The value of this world compared to the worlds below is in its simplicity, wholeness and its state of "rest". The "fourth floor" is part of the Upper world and it is separated from the rest of the „floors“ below because of the "quantity" of ideas that are in such intense and perfect state that people can not grasp because of the limitations of the human mind.

The mystic must be included in the process of both Apophatic and Cataphatic theology to truly understand God.<sup>44</sup> The true believer must at the same time accept the presence of God through the manifestation of all creation on the Tree of Life thus reflecting the process of generation or procession, but also at the same time he has to realize that the "multitude of parts" lacks unity and that God is the potential which can be accessed through the process of reversion. It further indicates that a believer must regain the "true" state beyond all conception or speculation about God, so he has to oscillate between the stating claims about God and the negation of those same claims to really catch the essence of what the God truly is.<sup>45</sup>



<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

*Although many researchers of the "Tree of Porphyry" observed this diagram exclusively from the perspective of medieval logic, the aim of this paper is to draw attention to its metaphysical and theological implications. Medieval Neoplatonistic philosophers and mystics within all three monotheistic religions sought to present the entire process of creation through the diagram of "Tree of Life" affirming many levels of existence through logic and ontology of being. Cataphatic theology based on Neoplatonic procession explains descending of being from seed to fruit on the Tree of Life, and the Apophatic theology based on Neoplatonic reversion explains ascension or return to a state of unity from fruit to seed. This is most evident in the mystical tradition of the medieval Bosnian Church based on Christian Neoplatonism and through the phenomenon of Bosnian medieval tombstone-stećak.*

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